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....Editorial...

It's just a shame all you readers can't be right in my office every minute of the time - - there's so much excitement going on! That's what makes me a science fiction fan: in no other literary field can you get those thrills that occur in this one.

Let's just take our Burroughs Mars campaign, for instance. How many of you readers happened to be viewing Edgar Bergen's "Do You Trust Your Wife" on May 1? Must have been quite a few, because that show has a Hooper of 40 million! Anyway, if you were watching, you saw S. J. Byrne and his beautiful wife and you heard about his Tarzan novel, and you heard OTHER WORLDS mentioned. In advertising circles, they'll tell you that mention was worth about $40,000.00. In my circle you'll only hear that it was nice. Advertising isn't all it's cracked up to be. For instance, *Amazing Stories* once ran an ad in *The American Weekly* (circ. 40 million), and got a *decrease in sale* that month of 2,000 copies! And we had a sensational story to offer, too!

Take that Burroughs thing, anyway. Just watch our November issue for the full story. It'll be a mighty interesting and exciting announcement. We have worked hard on this, and things like the Bergen show demonstrate that Stu Byrne knows his way around the publicity circuit. We don't know how many Americans are asking where they can get his novel to read, but there must be scads of 'em! Even if he told them it was a "labor of love" and the copyright laws prohibit publication without permission.

To get to other excitement, one bit of excitement we wouldn't want you to share in is the problems of publishing OTHER WORLDS and paying the bills as we go along. Just when we were beginning to breathe easier, some Republicans began to get obstreperous (by Republicans we mean big business, at which us little guys always rail and sneer). Anyway, we had to dig up some $7300.00 right pronto. (We did it.) And then some other Republican opined as how we came under the unemployment compensation law, even if we did have less than eight full-time employees, and tagged us for retroactive taxes back to hell and gone. Result, $1800 more we hadda dig up. You're asking yourself how come we're still in business? Fooi! We are used to that kind of stuff. We just dig up the money (some of the dero caves lead right under Fort Knox) and keep on going. The reason we can do this is because more and more readers are finding out good old OTHER WORLDS is once more the easiest reading and most entertaining and enjoyable magazine it's possible to get. So, the only casualty was in the date-line on this magazine. It should have been the August issue, and instead, it's the September issue. We just let a couple of News Company payments catch up with us, and presto, there was our money!

Speaking of excitement, those new readers are supplying plenty of that around here! We figure we do this well with the Novakkan series, what will we do with "The Timeless Man", "The Metamorphs", "Tri-Infinity," "The Sword of Aldones", "Circus In Time", "Rain of Fire", "Life and Death", "The Fires of Kessa", "Reluctant Eve", "Where the High Gods Go", and dozens of other terrific stories. Honestly, in all our thir-

ty years in this field, we've never read such a wonderful bunch of stories.

To those readers who have written us letters, we want to opologize. We'll *never* get time to answer such a flood! We regret it intensely, but we haven't even time to answer the business letters that are stacking up on us. Not many people realize that OTHER WORLDS is now a one-man operation, and combined with SEARCH (formerly MYSTIC), we've got a real job on our hands. Lots of midnight oil is burned. For instance, we do all our own layouts, planning covers, and even doing the art work! If a set of cover plates have to be made, we don't have an artist to do it. We get our brushes, paints, pens, inks, drawing board, and go to it. And believe us, ignorance is not bliss! We run into lots of things we don't know. Then we take care of subscriptions - - we've got over 9,000 plates in our live file. At first this was quite a problem, and accidents happened - - one of them causing subscribers to get copies a month late! (Our most recent fiasco of this kind was on the April issue, where we got our envelopes to the printer on time - - for once! - - only to have him discover he hadn't printed enough, and there weren't any left for subscribers.) The whole magazine had to go back on the presses, new covers printed, etc. We got hundreds of letters, but we couldn't answer them. We figured the appearance of the magazine would be the answer they really wanted! But in a way, those letters meant something to us. These writers were *anxious* to get their copies. What a nice feeling it is to know that!

How many readers know that your editor lives on a farm? That he hauls wood for the furnace? That he has a big garden, and does the plowing himself? That he has a son who wants to go fishing, and it's up to the old man to dig worms (and the soil's been frozen in Wisconsin this cockeyed spring!)? That he holds down a job on FATE magazine (only salary he gets)? That he publishes books on the side? That he belongs to the Lion's Club, and publishes their bulletin every two weeks - - besides being put on every committee that comes along? That his two daughters are 4-H members, and again it's Dad who takes them to meetings, helps out to run the club and aid in projects from painting signs to herding pigs?

It's certainly a full life, and we wouldn't give up a minute of it!

Along with all this we look at the future. We plan night and day on OTHER WORLDS and what we want to make of it. We tell ourselves that on a certain date we're going to add 16 pages, then 32, then 64. We picture novels like The Timeless Man being printed all in one issue. And we have to figure on doing it the hard way. The *easy* way would be for *one* in *ten* of our readers to subscribe instead of buying at the newsstands - - but we won't start that again! Last time we asked readers to help us attain a goal, along came the magazine crash and knocked us dead. No, this time you just subscribe if you happen to like the magazine so much you don't want to risk missing an issue!

By the way, we hope you've noticed that when we do run an incomplete story, we always offer to send you the missing issues entirely free, if you'll just pay the cost (one thin dime). That cost includes the extra magazines we order just for this purpose, an envelope to send it in, the postage it costs to send it, the labor involved in wrapping and taking to the post office. Actually, the dime doesn't do it, but a dime is the easiest thing to send in a letter. By the way you readers are buying back issues, those continued stories are good enough to make you want them complete. If you missed the first book of The Timeless Man, don't worry. We ordered a whole slew of extra copies. We don't think we were wrong in doing so! *Rap.*

A Witch In Time

Humor is a rare quality in the science fiction field—and few writers dare tackle it. But Author Locke both dares and does! Here is a story that will leave you rolling on the floor when you've finished. We are still rolling ourselves, and we've read it four times. In this story a subject avoided by almost all authors is faced squarely, and with uproariously mirthful results.

By Robert Donald Locke

THE LANDSCAPE stopped blurring, became solid. A dusty road wandered away from him, up through wooded hills. On either side, meadows stretched to oak groves. In the distance he saw a lazy blue stream. Cattle grazed on its banks.

X-915 knew instantly things weren't as they should be. For one thing, he was no longer invisible. Second: his shiny metal extremities were planted square on the ground. Third: actinic rays from the hot yellow sun were warming up the burnished plates of his chest.

For a moment, he suffered panic. Then, his alarm circuit woke up, cutting out the relay from his thalamic cells.

His cool, rational positronic brain went to work. Obviously, somebody among those human dopes back in Chrono-Control had been daydreaming. Had let a rescue contact slide by. Blankety-

blank flesh-heads!

A grain of hope still lingered. One small grain. If search instruments located him within ten minutes, the Watchers could still chrono-port him back to the lab in time to be demolecularized.

There wasn't too much margin, however. His system had already absorbed enough local molecules to cause him to materialize - - - which was a pretty fateful sign!

The stranded researcher tried to review what information his learning banks contained about this era. It was a feudal period, he knew: the upper classes were obsessed with private wars, the serfs hunger-stricken and downtrodden. It was also an age of abysmal ignorance and superstition.

Then, X-915 suddenly remembered more and shuddered. This wasn't the original 14th Century of the history reels - - - this was the five hundredth time-line over! About as far as you could get from dead center!

Here, some of the laws of the normal Einstein-Dirac-Schrodinger universe were about as weak as the ill-fated 33rd and 34th Amendments forbidding sex for human females under twenty-five had been back in 21st Century America.

It was quite apparent X-915 was - - - as the tri-vid comics liked to say - - - in a situation.

Just as he was about to hunker down and wait, the robot's scanning cells spotted activity. Strangers were approaching along the highway. Humans by the look of them, too, despite the brightly-caparisoned quadrupeds they rode. Naturally they'd be humans, X-915 reproved himself a moment later. Robots and androids wouldn't even be invented yet for another 800 years - - - if they ever would, along this crazy time-track.

Now, the entourage was virtually abreast of him: two mounted knights in full dress armor, accompanied by a half dozen surly-looking, unshaved men-at-arms.

The warrior in the lead rested his lance, which boasted a fluttering crimson pennant atip the spearhead. Raising his helmet, he addressed X-915: "Hail, strange knight! Methinks, thou hast been severely unhorsed?"

X-915 praised his lucky stars his semantic analyzer had materialized along with him. By its aid, the native's barbarous dialect came out in crystal-clear English the very moment the words hit the robot's aural circuits.

"I'm afraid I've lost my way," the robot returned. "Can you tell me where I am?"

"On the borders of Poitrein. Near the castle of Vennes."

X-915 reflected that over, decided he was lost indeed.

"I have a spare gelding in tow," the strange knight went on. "By my faith, if you're looking for a chance at arms, you should join us."

"Should I?"

The strange knight stroked his fierce mustache. "I can promise you good sport. Aye, good stout peasants to run a sword through. Or perhaps merry forest rogues we can catch and make dance at the end of a halter. How be you yclept?"

"My name?" The robot decided to be truthful. "It is X - - -" He glanced nervously at his own chrono-dial. Dimensional time. Already it was too late, he noted with sinking apprehension. He had passed the deadline.

"Sir Ecks?" spoke up the mounted knight who had asked all the questions. "It soundeth like an honest Christian name, I trow. Welcome then, Sir Ecks. What an excellent basinet you wear! Good Toledo steel, I'll warrant. And that gorget and those tonlets! God's blood, but you must have served a powerful liege lord!"

Suddenly, X-915 saw what he must do. He cast the die. "Perhaps I served such a lord, but no more," he declared proud-

ly, clanking forward like Caesar poised at the Rubicon. "Henceforth, I am a free agent. I accept your offer. I join you."

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, the procession was jogging along the road to Vennes, taking their leisure through a narrow green valley surrounded by beetling cliffs. Where the valley thinned to a defile ahead of them, battlements and towers of a high castle rose in brooding splendor against the horizon. Probably one of the baronial strongholds of the period as yet unrazed by gunpowder, the new Sir Ecks told himself.

On approaching the castle, the robot saw that a small dirty village nestled below its walls. Chickens scattered from underfoot of the horses. Mongrel dogs rose in packs to bark at the newcomers.

"A few hours ago, I was next to nothing," Sir Ecks philosophized. His spirits had now risen considerably, and he had again allowed current from his thalamic cells to flow into his thinking circuits. "A mere wage slave. A hired hand. Now look at me."

His mind drifted back to the past, so near, yet so remote. Even though he had been a first-class Type-3 researching robot, nobody had given him credit for any brains. Humans got all the plums. He was expected to "stay in his place." Whoever heard of a robot crossing over the line? Impossible! Absurd! That was the line they had taken back at the barracks. No robot could ever pass for a human.

X-915's metal-sheened head reared. "They said it couldn't be done," he crowed, inwardly. "But I've done it. I've passed. What's more, I don't give a blankety-blank if the Chrono-Control lab never catches up with me. I'm a man, at last!"

Sir Brian, the knight with the bristling black mustache, rode back to speak with him.

"By the devil," he scowled, "you must truly be made of iron, Sir Ecks. Thou hast neither stopped to devour sustenance nor to relieve thyself, since we started. Thy armor fitteth like you were poured into it. Were you a king, where you came from?"

X-915's metal-constricted chest almost swelled visibly. Already he'd advanced from the rank of humble researcher to that of accepted warrior; now he was being compared to a monarch! Such swift steps! Where would it end? He was tempted to pinch himself to see if he were awake, except he doubted he would be able to feel anything short of a sledgehammer blow.

"No, I was not quite a king," he confessed. "To be truthful, I hardly counted - - -"

"A COUNT! By the tail of Satan, I knew it! Your bearing gave you away, my lord. But behold, we enter the village now. And just in time for a ripping good show, it would seem."

Activity in the village did seem to be at a peak of feverish excitement. Sir Ecks' scanning cells, sweeping the bustling scene, quickly focused on an arresting sight near the center of the flurrying, milling crowd. An ancient scythe-nosed crone in filthy rags had been bound to a mound of faggots in the village square. Next to her stood a brawny-armed masked man in a leathern apron. He was about to apply a torch.

"Why, it's old Maudie, the witch!" ejaculated Sir Brian. "What mischief suppose you the old hag's been up to, now?"

"Hexing cows again, no doubt," spoke up a companion. "Or, maybe souring wine. Anyhow, good riddance, I say."

"You mean," broke in the new Sir Ecks, unbelievingly; "they actually intend to roast her?"

"Till she's brown as a baked leg of mutton," laughed Sir Brian.

"But that's butchery! Surely, you people can't believe in witchcraft?"

"Somebody better tell Sir Ecks what

century this is, hey, Sir Brian?" shouted a footman, sarcastically. "We're not living in the Dark Ages, anymore. Imagine! People once let sorceresses and morlocks live. By Thor, we're more civilized, now!"

"You mean, we're just going to stand by and do nothing?" protested Sir Ecks, again. "We can't let this go on. Are we men, or are we just a pack of automatons - - -?"

"You don't understand. She's a witch," complained Sir Brian. "She's not entitled to our knightly services. Now, if she were a fair red-lipped damsel, a man might reconsider - - -"

"I don't care what the poor woman's done," announced Sir Ecks, a vein of chivalry coming suddenly to life inside him. "I'm going to rescue her."

This new emotion that flooded through his circuits, how account for it? Sir Ecks wondered. Perhaps the metal he was made of had come from a relic of King Arthur's day. Or, perhaps a museum copy of Sir Lancelot's working armor had been donated to some scrap drive, from whence it got forged and drawn into shape at Robot Factory Number Seven.

Undoubtedly, this new-found gallantry came from his ancestors somewhere, Sir Ecks assured himself.

But what matter? Now, he was off to meet the challenge of combat. Sir Ecks' steed thundered into the village square, scattering the ancient crone's tormentors. One sturdy sword stroke ended the token resistance put up by the masked executioner. In a moment, Sir Ecks had dismounted and was snapping the cords that bound old Maudie to her funeral pile.

"Just in time," she hissed relievedly, through toothless gums. "The very nick. But you're no true knight. I know your secret. You're from another world. There's no man inside that fine suit of clothes, my fellow."

Startled, Sir Ecks' let his scanning orbs roam over her canny shriveled features. "You won't give me away?" his voice-box pleaded.

"Betray my gallant? Not old Maudie," the hag cackled. "But we must hurry. They'll be out from the castle soon enough, to see what's holding up the cremation. I was all set to change into a bat, when you galloped up. But by Satan if I don't think this way's better."

Sir Ecks remounted, swooped up the witch's surprisingly light form with one metal hand. He seated her on his saddle bow. Within seconds, he and his companions were racing through the woods, a small troop of cavalry which had emerged from the citadel in hot unbridled pursuit.

The gap closed rapidly. Fresher horses found it easy to gain upon the tired panting mounts of Sir Ecks' and Sir Brian's band.

"I fear we're lost," heaved Sir Brian, between curses. "Our cowardly men-at-arms have scattered. In a moment, we'll be overhauled, cut to pieces like Turks."

"I'll make a charm," screeched Maudie. "Aye, that'll scare the carrion off!"

Before Sir Ecks could caution her to save her breath, the crone moistened a scrawny finger, drew three circles and a pentagram in the empty air, then spat in the grass. A cloud of blue smoke billowed up behind the fleeing band. The pursuing retainers from the castle, now less than a hundred yards behind, plunged directly into the writhing fog. Plunged and stumbled and fell; and lay in grotesque stiffened heaps upon the ground, horses and men mingled together.

Sir Ecks and Sir Brian pulled up to a halt, gazed back thoughtfully.

"We can rest now," Maudie advised. "They'll sleep for a day and a night, curse them."

After his years spent as a plodding research robot, Sir Ecks' built-in scientific curiosity was not a thing to be

easily shed - - - or put off. Now, it asserted itself. "What sort of gas was that?" he asked. "It certainly turned the trick neatly."

"Gas?" the crone chuckled. "What strange words you use, my fancy knight. No, it was magic - - - and magic, alone. But look, here come our missing churls! Wave them off - - - or the charm will take the lads for the same long nap."

Sir Brian moved first. He gripped his reins, circled the blue cloud by a wide margin, and managed to warn his followers in time. Presently, he galloped back, the men-at-arms slowly straggling after him.

"Where to now, Sir Ecks?" he asked, surrendering the leadership he had already virtually abdicated. "We'll not be welcome anymore in Poitrein, I can assure thee."

"Then to Orlon we should ride in full haste," interposed old Maudie. She pushed aside a wisp of snow-white hair. "We can be married there, my fine Galahad and I."

"What, Sir Ecks espouse you, you old hag of hell?" scoffed Sir Brian, laughing fiercely. "By all the saints, who ever heard such claptrap?"

"But knights do wed the damsels they save from the flames," the toothless witch chided. She turned to Sir Ecks. "Am I not fetching to you, my noble lord?"

"He'd be a liar if he said aye," broke in Sir Brian, again. "Go along with ye, Maudie. You've had your fun; now skedaddle."

"I insist on my rights. The road to Orlon lies ahead. There's a fat bishop resides there, too. He'll forgive my sins, if I make a Christian marriage."

"She seems to have thee, Sir Ecks," said Sir Brian, sadly. He laid a mailed hand across Sir Ecks' metallic shoulder. "I will be thy best man. It is the law of chivalry - - - and we would be dishonored, if we sought to weasel out of it."

"Then, it's off to Orlon we must trot," the croaking voice of Maudie sang out, merrily. "With a hey-nonny-nonny and a hot - - -"

The remaining words sounded vaguely indecent to Sir Ecks' straining ears.

BY THE THIRD DAY of the journey, some of Sir Ecks' original bewilderment at the peculiar state of affairs - - - particularly with respect to the non-Euclidean laws that existed and operated in this new world - - - had faded.

He was reconciled to the fact that when you got yourself stranded some five hundred time-lines over from dead center, you had to adapt yourself to new concepts.

Such features as constant gravity, immutability of molecular structure, and dependability of mathematical progression were bound to get a little wobbly and fuzzy. Two and two no longer always made four; sometimes it made three, more often five. And a rose wasn't always a rose. It could quite easily change to a poisonous green viper or a two-bladed sword.

But one aspect of life did remain constant in this new universe: *the esthetic aspect.* A rose by any other name might still smell as sweet, but a face by no matter what name remained ugly as ever.

Traveling was slow and arduous.

To get to Orlon from Poitrein without passing the dangerous castle of Vennes would have required an extra week; so the group had voted to take the shorter route.

"This Vennes you mentioned?" Sir Ecks asked. "Why is it dangerous?"

"All men know the answer to that," said Sir Brian. "A dragon hideth there. Not a fire-breathing one; that's superstition, of course. But a winged dragon that spouteth live steam. I swear to thee, Sir Ecks, matching swords with the monster is worse than dallying ten nights

in a Byzantine bathhouse."

"But Sir Ecks is not afraid." jibed Maudie. "He is a man, isn't he?"

"Aye," said Sir Brian, scratching his blue-black chin. "Though as the days march by, one thing doth continue to puzzle me most greatly." He gazed at Sir Ecks with unabashed admiration. "God's word, but I think thou art truly a man of iron, for sure."

"Aye, indeed," chimed in his companion knight. "Sir Ecks doth never leave his armor. He must have learned the tactics of war from a great general, for he exposeth neither his vanguard nor his rearguard."

But if anyone expected Maudie, the old witch, to blush at overhearing these ribald jibes, they were grievously disappointed. Rather, a mark of deep concern crossed the crone's face and her features knit in concentrated thought. Perhaps the notion of Sir Ecks' structural defects filled her with sympathy. Who knows?

The entourage neared the castle of Vennes at dusk.

"It is possible the dragon is out foraging," declared Sir Brian, seriously. "Maudie, of course, has nothing to worry about; the dragon feeds only on virgins and the old witch couldn't catch a unicorn if her life depended on it. But if the dragon be at home, taking his ease, I fear we are all in for sore excitement. He liketh not trespassers."

"Never ye worry, my fine gentlemen," the witch spoke up, from where she rode upon Sir Ecks' saddle-bow. "Old Maudie will scout the lay of the land for ye."

"But you have heard," protested Sir Ecks, his robot-engineered sense of ethics (and caution) rising to the fore. "It is dangerous enough for us knights. I forbid you to creep through the forest alone."

"And did ye think I was going to creep?" Maudie laughed, scornfully. She quickly executed two pentagrams and one rather sloppy circle in the air, and sneezed over her left shoulder. The shriveled form in the tawdry rags promptly disappeared - - - or rather, suffered a complete metamorphosis. In a twinkling of an eye, it ceased to be annuated, desiccated, and mammalian; it became a shiny, glossy-plumaged species of the class *Aves* - - - a raven, in fact.

Croaking triumphantly, she fluttered her wings, soared into the air and vanished in the gathering twilight.

"Methinks, the change did improve the old hag's voice somewhat," commented Sir Brian. "Aye - - - and her appearance."

There was no hint in the knight's voice that he realized he had witnessed anything marvelous, whatsoever. Sir Ecks, on the contrary, was thunderstruck. But then Sir Ecks was the grandchild of an analogue computer and a gyromatic pilot, by a crossbar switching system and a high-fi tape recorder. How could he help but have been cursed with a mind of pure logic and no faith?

Maudie returned in twenty minutes and resumed her original shape. "The coast is not clear," she reported. "I'm afraid you bonnie gentlemen will have to slay the reptile. That is, if old Maudie's to be made an honest wench of."

"Is he asleep?" Sir Ecks asked. Already, he had begun contemplating what a steam bath might do to his well-oiled joints. If there was anything he feared, he told himself, it was rust.

"What?" asked Maudie. "Are ye afraid?"

"Sir Ecks fears neither beast nor devil, you old sorceress," Sir Brian spoke up in defense of his friend. "I wot not, but what he will take that scurvy dragon like Sir Graunt took Richmonde." Again, he glanced admiringly at his companion. "He is unparalleledly a man of purest iron. Unparalleledly."

Sir Ecks was tempted to declare, "Speak for yourself, Brian," but he forebore. This was one of the burdens that went with having attained to the stature of a man. It was not a burden

to be dropped lightly. Rank had its duties, as well as its privileges.

There was no choice but to ride on.

As the band plunged deeper into the darkening forest, Maudie's wrinkled hand suddenly reached out and stroked Sir Ecks' fine steeled forearm. "Well, bless my hide," she said, in a low voice. "I do believe Sir Ecks is worried." Then, as if by afterthought she added "Perhaps, it's because he has no heart."

"You promised," Sir Ecks pleaded in a voice that was an equally low monotone. "You said you wouldn't give me away. If they find out, they may even . . . " he choked over the words " . . . dismantle me - - - "

"Perhaps lack of heart's the cause of all your troubles," Maudie went on, as if she had not heard. "Perhaps having no heart is why ye can't love old Maudie that never did any harm except curdle a few milk pails on Walpurgis nights; or perhaps sell a love philter to some redblooded maiden anxious to defile a pure knight - - -"

Maudie sat up in the saddle. "Well, if it's lack of a heart that's making ye such a poor gallant, I'd be a poor witch if I couldn't cure that quick enough - - - "

She reached inside her rags, brought out a tiny leather pouch. Opening it, she smeared some of the powdery contents against Sir Ecks' broad-plated chest. She sang out:

"Bistus, schmistus,
Hermes Trismegistus,

"Bat's dung, rat's blood, wolfbane, spiderweb. Baby's caul and hanged man's knuckle.

"Pestled with Cupid's dart,
And we'll give a man a heart!"

Thump thump!

Sir Ecks pulled hard on the bridle reins. Had his horse lost a shoe? The gently rocking rhythm of the steed's gait seemed to be off, somehow.

Thump, thump!

No, the sound was in his own audio-receptor circuits!

X-915 shifted the frequency focus of his scanning orbs to X-ray vision. Bending forward, he inspected the interior of his own chest cavity. What his penetrating eyes discovered there almost caused him to lose his sanity, that practically foolproof sanity built into him by the best robotic engineers of his generation.

A heart was beating inside his chest! Squeezed in between revolving cams, transistors, psionic tubes, positronic relays, throbbed an actual flesh-and-blood functioning heart! It was enclosed in some kind of plexiglass chamber. Tubes resembling the aorta and other circulatory channels fed a reddish sort of liquid out to the rest of the body.

Sir Brian, who had been riding a few yards ahead as a scout, now came loping back. "The dragon doth stir," he said. "I have just espied him exercising in the courtyard. He looketh thin, gaunt. Doubtless, the monster hath not fed properly for many moons. The countryside is sorely barren of eligible virgins - - -"

Sir Ecks felt new courage pulse through him.

"Fall back," he directed his companions; not only Sir Brian, but the cringing men-at-arms who still accompanied him as well. "This is a job for my lance, alone. I should be miscreant in my duty, were I to allow another to fight my battles."

Miscreant. It was an obsolete word, possibly; but a good one. Aware he liked it, Sir Ecks wondered vaguely where he'd dredged it up.

Sir Brian shrugged. "As thou sayest. But the old crone's not worth it. Now, if it was a fair red-blooded damsel - - -"

"I believe you said that once before," retorted Sir Ecks. "But, I intend to defend womanhood wherever it is threatened."

"Chacun a son gout," said Sir Brian, having the last word.

His lance couched, Sir Ecks spurred his gelding's flanks; the charger gal-

loped forward. In a moment, horse and rider broke out of the forest, into a clearing. Ahead loomed the grim monstrous castle of Vennes. At the postern gate hung a horn. Sir Ecks realized he was supposed to canter up and blow the trumpet and thus to summon the dragon to battle; but such powers of breath were among the gifts he had not been gifted with.

If he felt frustrated, however, the feeling did not last long; for the dragon forthwith took it upon himself to sally forth without benefit of an invitation. As if to show his disdain for his challenger, the monster blew steam out of only one nostril - - - the left one, at that!

Sir Ecks told himself: "I must remember. I'm no longer a robot, I'm a man. I'm a knight. What would a true knight do in a test of this sort?"

A knight wouldn't cringe. Not even if his heart was throbbing like a runaway piledriver, he wouldn't.

But the fact is, thought Sir Ecks, my heart *is* throbbing. Exactly like a piledriver. He hadn't realized what nuisances humans had to bear up under, in connection with their dreadfully complicated anatomy.

Suddenly, the dragon charged.

Sir Ecks pulled his steed aside at the last possible moment. The monster rushed by, unable to swerve. Then wheeling to the attack, Sir Ecks started after it, lance fully poised for combat.

The dragon glanced over its shoulder. In all its three thousand years of life, never had it been pursued. Not knowing what to make of such a development, it kept running. Patently, this was no ordinary knight errant it had to deal with.

The chase - - - for chase it must be called - - - led up valley, down valley, through forest and across dale, until finally the desperate dragon, determined to make a last ditch stand, halted and faced its enemy. Its scaly fore-claws pawed the ground weakly. Then, both nostrils attempted to snort. Tried, but failed! Not a gust emerged!

The dragon had run completely out of steam!

In less than a minute, the slaughter was over.

WHEN the dispatched dragon finally turned over on his spiny back and gave up the ghost, Sir Ecks severed the head (his memory banks told him that was the traditional thing to do) and spurred back to his waiting friends with the gory trophy.

Sir Brian rode up to meet him. Removing his gauntlets, he shook Sir Ecks' hand warmly, congratulated him paladin to paladin. The foot-weary men-at-arms raised a rousing cheer. Then, Maudie aproached, shyly like a young girl instead of a scraggle-toothed witch.

Sir Ecks' scanning orbs beamed at her. Suddenly, a warm expansive emotion flooded through his entire circuits - - - a feeling such as his factory-made thalamic cells had never generated in him, not once from the very first day he stepped off the assembly line.

What was it? It was grand. It was glorious.

Could it be love?

A robot in love with a witch?

A ragged dirty old witch, at that?

If miracles were possible anywhere in the thousand and one parallel universes that cluttered the time-tracks, surely they should be possible in the five hundredth time-line over. Wasn't that as remote as you could get from the prosaic old center track?

Sir Ecks' heart developed a malfunction. It began skipping beats.

By all the gods of robotdom, it *was* love!

"Maudie," his voice-box stammered. "Maudie, I - - I - - - -"

The toothless or almost toothless mouth gaped at him. "Speak it out, my master - - -" she said, almost mockingly.

"I - - - I - - -"

Unable to express the total depth of his feelings, Sir Ecks bent over and kissed her on the dirt-smudged forehead.

Suddenly, a transformation occurred. It was like the opening of night-blooming cereus, the rising of the phoenix from the ashes, the swan emerging from the moulting feathers of the ugly duckling.

The sorceress shimmered like a vibrating crystal. When she stopped, she had shucked off forty years like a serpent slips from its outworn weeds.

Her smoothed-out skin was blanched to a flawless white. Her eyes became a dancing green. Her hair reddened to sunset flame. Her flesh became that of a witch-girl's: voluptuous, high-breasted, long-legged, sleek-thighed. Her tapering fingers reached up, gaily-placed an emerald comb into her shining hair. White even teeth flashed a devilish grin between lips as ripe as cherries.

She gestured again; the rags fell off her; and for a moment, her body was nude and dazzling. Then, she executed a pentagram and suddenly she was sheathed in flowing silk, green as the sea-green of her eyes.

"God's blood," swore Sir Brian, who had moved up to Sir Ecks' flank. "It's young Maudie! The witch-queen of Poitrein! What say, girl! Just pretending to be your old grandmother, eh?"

"Aye, Sir Brian," Maudie laughed. "A merry romp it was, too. Grannie was called off to a council in Magyaria. I had to stand in for her around home. But just the same, those cursed Poitreinians might have burned me if my good Sir Ecks had not happened along." She turned slowly and bestowed upon Sir Ecks a twice-dazzling smile. "Well, my liege, art thou ready to marry up with thy old crone now?"

Sir Ecks' brand new heart had shifted into overdrive. "This fat bishop you mentioned, must we wait for him?" he demanded, impatiently, his pulse racing madly. "Can't we just find some simple country priest right away? Along the roadside somewhere?"

"Indeed," said Maudie. "I know of one. And we could be there right now, all of us. I'd have merely to snap my fingers."

Which she did.

The landscape rolled and surged with a tremendous crackling of thunder. Then, it dissolved all about them, re-forming into a new and unfamiliar scene. The little band now stood in a woodland grove, before a rough-hewn chapel from which even now a cassock-clad friar was emerging.

Then, Sir Ecks chanced to think of something. Something so depressing, it promptly dampened his spirits completely. How he could have been such an optimistic simpleton? He, who was still such a long way from being a complete human.

The lovely Maudie noticed. "What is wrong, my lord?" she teased. "What troubles thee, now?"

Sir Ecks' problem was too intimate, too personal for other human ears to hear. He bent close and in a faltering embarassed whisper, confided his apprehensions to his love.

Maudie's laughter floated on the evening breeze. "Thou shouldst never have given it a thought, my master. If my witchcraft could provide you with a heart, did you doubt for a minute I could not also provide you, my lover, with - - -?" She gestured cabalistically, "- - - You see," she giggled. "It was the work of only a moment."

Sir Ecks realized more of this inexplicable magic had been worked on him. Yet, he hesitated to shift his attention to where his bride-to-be had shamelessly pointed. Then suddenly, it was not even necessary. He felt a twinge, then a tingle. Then suddenly his whole body underneath the armor experienced an overwhelmingly uncomfortable sensation that told him he was truly human at last.

But both of them forgot that when Nature has been dammed up for days and days, Nature is entitled to its hour of release.

"The good father is waiting," murmured Maudie. "Shall we enter?"

"I - - - I - - -" Sir Ecks stammered

"What is it, darling?" Maudie asked, her witch-green eyes full of unbelieveable innocence

"You'll have to excuse me," blustered Sir Ecks. "Go in and wait for me, my love. I - - -I - - - I'll be along in just a moment - - -"

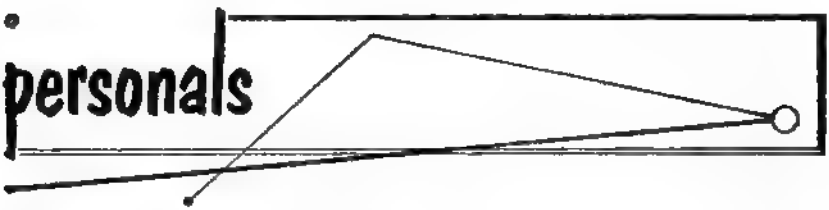
And then suddenly, the mighty Sir Ecks, champion of champions, broke and ran spraddle-legged for the woods, disappearing behind the kindly sheltering cover of the beech trees.

One of the band, thinking his leader might be ill, followed Sir Ecks a few feet into the forest. Then suddenly retreating at the miracle he witnessed, he hurried back to Sir Brian's side. Nudging that battle scarred warrior, he said, "I kept telling thee. But thou wouldst not believe. It was bound to happen."

"Thou meanest - - -?" asked Sir Brian, incredulously.

The man nodded his head, solemnly. "Aye, at last."

Sir Brian thought this over, then said: "Anyhow, he went four whole days. By the rood, it will be a cold day in winter before we ever see another such iron man, methinks."



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Cat Astrophy

Have you ever had a cat look at you and found yourself thinking: "If looks could kill, I'd be a dead man right now!" Cats have terrorized man for ages, and here's a story to freeze your mind in your skull!

THE RECEPTIONIST at the company hospital had apparently thrown the carmine at her lips. The expression on her face said she was going to be calm and composed even if the effort killed her. As the big man with the German shepherd dog came through the front door, moving fast, her relief was so great that she almost burst into tears.

"Oh, Mr. Donnell, I'm so glad you got here!"

People around the Norko Atomic Energy Generating Plant usually greeted Donnell with relief. He was the security engineer reponsible for the safety of all plant employees. Perhaps in many instances he was responsible for their lives also. He took the handkerchief from his breast pocket and extended it to the girl at the reception desk.

"What happened, Felice?" His voice was calm and soothing, deep with sympathy and understanding, and with peace of mind. He waited for the girl to finish with the handkerchief. There had never been a woman in his life and he was always a little uncertain what to do around them.

"I - - - I don't know, sir. Dr. Busby said to get you, at once." A smile made a valiant attempt to reach the surface of her face. "All - - - all I heard was the screaming." The smile gave up the effort to reach the surface. "They - - - they brought the patient in at the ambulance entrance and all - - - all I heard was the screaming." The expression on her face said she hadn't wanted to hear any more and was sorry she had heard this much.

Donnell waited for her to get control of herself. At his side, the dog was uneasy, twisting and pulling at an invisible leash but never actually taking a step that was not dictated by a movement of the big man's hand or the tone of his voice. Or by something else. There had been times when Donnell, in flights of fantasy, had treasured the belief that Rex could read his mind

"You heard the screaming?" he prompted.

The girl sniffed into the handkerchief, then apologized for the damage she was doing.

"It's all right," Donnell said.

"That's really all I know, Mr. Donnell, except - - - it was kind of funny screaming. Not the kind of funny you laugh at." The lips lost more of their carmine as they tried to pucker. "He wasn't screaming nearly so much because he was hurt as because he was scared

By Robert Moore Williams

"The cat - - - was in my bedroom just a while ago. It just looked in and went on. I was so afraid. Then I knew it would come to you!"

- - - the deep kind of scared."

"And that scared you?"

"Y - - - yes."

Donnell nodded. A man had screamed in terror and terror had come up inside another human being. Did a scared human being actually radiate a wave that every other human being recognized and responded to deep down inside of him where the ghosts of the history of the race were still held in inadequate chains?

"What scared him, Felice? Did you get any impression of that?"

The handkerchief twisted in her hands. "I - - - I don't know, sir. It wasn't anything I have ever seen - - - or even thought about."

The girl was not telling the truth and Donnell knew it. She had *thought* about whatever it was that had scared this man.

He let her have her lie and went past the reception desk and into the main corridor of the hospital. Down at the far end of the corridor a nurse was emerging from a room. As she opened the door, a muted, far-away screaming came to Donnell's ears. The man in there was already under sedation, Donnell knew, but the sedation had not yet reached the source of the terror in him. He thought, with regret, that the brilliant medical science of 1992 had not discovered a sedative that would extend its soothing influence into the depths of the human soul and bring comfort where comfort was really needed.

The door of Busby's office was closed. Donnell knocked, then entered. A growl sounded beside him, a snarl hit his ear drums, and a bundle of gray fur exploded from the floor to the top of the filing cabinets.

"Heel, Rex!"

The big shepherd pulled himself out of his charge with reluctance. The cat, a giant Siamese Tom, glared defiance from the top of the cabinets at both man and dog. The two men in the room looked up as Donnell entered. Their faces showed the same relief at the sight of the plant security engineer as the receptionist, though not in so great a degree. This problem that they faced, whatever it was, was their problem too. They welcomed Donnell's aid in solving it but they did not intend to push it off on him and wash their hands of it.

Busby was behind the desk. He was the medical officer of the installation and was in charge of the hospital. There was a warmth and a human friendliness about Busby that Donnell liked very much. Crakhorn was standing beside the desk. He was the consulting psychiatrist employed by the hospital and occupied the adjoining office. A competent man, if he had a failing it lay in the fact that he loved the cat now snarling from the top of the cabinets more than he loved his patients. An impatience that was close to anger came up in him at the sight of Rex.

"No pets are allowed in this hospital."

Donnell grinned at him. "Sometime I'm going to let Rex enforce that rule," he said. "I know just where he will start." He glanced at the cat.

"He's just a cat," Crakhorn said.

"Rex is just a dog," Donnell answered. He looked at Busby. "Felice called me. She said something about a man screaming."

Busby nodded. Lines appeared on his face. "We have had an accident."

"Oh, Lord!" The way Donnell said the words, they were a prayer. "Don't tell me that somebody has got a dose of radioactivity!" As security officer, it was his job to prevent this from happening. As a human being, it was also his job to prevent it. He knew only too well the possible effects on human tissue of over-exposure to radiation from the hell broth they brewed here.

"No radioactivity," Busby said. His frown deepened. "I wish it were as simple as that. Then it would be easier to understand."

"Eh?" Donnell was startled. What could be more complex and difficult to understand than the effect of radiation on human tissue?

"The patient - - - his name is Crane - - - claims he was clawed and bitten by an animal. He thinks it was a mountain lion. Here on company property." Crakhorn was somewhat outraged. No mountain lion had been reported in this section of the Rockies in over twenty years.

"He also says it happened underground at the guinea pig breeding station - - - he's the technician in charge of breeding guinea pigs. He claims that during the past week or two the same animal has been killing the guinea pigs - - - slaughtering them."

"A mountain lion killing guinea pigs hardly seems reasonable." Donnell said.

"Not when they are in their cages," Crakhorn said.

"Then what is the problem, what are we dealing with?"

"We're either dealing with delusion, or a deliberate attempt to perpetuate fraud. Crane may have faked the accident, to get compensation."

Behind the desk, Busby twisted in growing discomfort. "I know Crane. He isn't the type who fakes accidents."

"Then it is delusion," Crakhorn said. His voice was forceful but he seemed uncomfortable with his conclusion Donnell had the impression that Crakhorn's forceful tone was designed more to impress and convince the psychiatrist than his listeners. Donnell waited. Both of these men were too uncomfortable for the whole story to have been told.

"Felice said Crane was scared," Donnell ventured, when neither man seemed to want to continue.

"Uh-huh," Busby nodded. "So am I." Donnell knew Busby well enough to know that he would not be easily frightened, by anything on Earth.

"Yes?" Donnell said, encouragingly. "I dressed Crane's wounds," Busby said, as if that explained his attitude. Again he twisted in his chair. Suddenly he came to his feet. "Do you want to see those wounds?" Speaking to both men, his voice was a demand and a challenge.

"Well - - - " Crakhorn said.

"I do," Donnell answered. "Stay, Rex." The dog sank to the floor, and put his head between his paws. His eyes did not leave the cat on top of the cabinets. They had not left it since he had entered the office. Donnell and Crakhorn followed Busby down the corridor.

As they opened the door of the hospital room, Donnell heard the sound again, a thin, muted, far-off wailing. The nurse rose from her chair at the side of the bed.

"He's still making that sound?" Busby said.

"Yes, Dr. Busby. But it is not so loud as it was."

Busby bent down beside the man. Watching, Donnell saw that the patient's lips were not moving. "How is he making that sound?"

"I wish I knew," Busby answered. "He is so deep in sedation that I could perform a major operation on him right now without his feeling it."

"But how - - - "

Busby shook his head. "There is no organ known to me in the human body that can make such a sound."

"The screaming of the soul?" Donnell wondered half aloud.

"Eh?" Crakhorn said. "What nonsense are you talking? Even if he had a soul, how could he use it to scream, since by definition it is metaphysical, non-physical?"

"I'm sorry," Donnell apologized. He had used a word that had no scientific meaning and had gotten himself put into his place for it. Unease was coming up in him.

The unease grew as Busby slid aside the hospital gown. Under the clear plastiskin bandage the mangled red wounds at the neck were clearly re-

vealed. They were closed now. Under the influence of the magic drugs of 1992, healing had already begun.

"Some of these cuts were an inch deep," Busby said. "I measured them."

He slid the gown off the arm. The patient did not stir. Only the high thin wailing and the slow rise and fall of the chest showed that Crane was still alive. Scratches showed on the arm, deep gashes that went in to the bone. Busby revealed the back. More cuts were there.

A shudder passed through Donnell. Fangs had sunk deep in this man's neck, claws had ripped at arm and back. But what had sunk into his soul, what had started this far-off wailing that even heavy sedation could not stop?

Crakhorn led the way to the door. The psycho seemed in a hurry, as if there was something here in this room that he did not like at all. Busby and Donnell followed him. The screaming was in the hall now, ahead of them.

The door of Busby's office was open. Felice was hanging on to the knob with the grip of a drowning woman. The screams were coming from her. Donnell broke into a run.

"Felice? What is it? What's wrong?" Donnell caught her by the arm. She turned startled eyes toward him, eyes that looked at him and did not see him but continued to see something else instead, something that was inside her mind. He shook her, roughly. The eyes stopped seeing the something that was inside her mind and saw him instead. She released her grip on the doorknob and clutched at him.

"What was it, Felice?" Donnell desperately hoped that she could tell him but suspected she could not.

"I - - - " Her face was against his coat, burrowing there with an intensity of an animal trying to dig a hole to hide in. Fear close to terror was in her but there was no memory of what had caused the fear. Only the emotion remained, lingering after the event like the evil that men do. Then, as Donnell shook her again, the emotion itself was turned off, kicked deep into some hidden well, and the girl was apologizing profusely, over and over again. "I'm such a little scared cat. I'm sorry, Mr. Donnell."

"It's all right," Donnell said. Busby and Crakhorn were watching closely but in complete silence. Crakhorn's lips were a straight line. A sag seemed to have appeared in Busby's shoulders.

"What did you want here, Felice?"

"I tried to reach Dr. Busby on the phone. When he didn't answer, I came down to his office. It - - - It's Mrs. Crane. She has called to see about her husband."

"Thank you, Felice. I'll see her at once. But - - - what frightened you?" Busby's voice was very gentle.

"Why - - - Dr. Busby - - - I don't really know. I knocked and when you didn't answer, I opened the door. I - - - I thought I saw something in your office, but now I don't even know what it was I thought I saw." She was telling the truth and the three men knew it.

"Okay, Felice," Busby said, with regret in his voice. "Run back to your desk now. Send Mrs. Crane in to see me."

The girl went hastily down the corridor. "A hysteric," Crakhorn said. "And maybe worse." His lips set in a grimmer line.

"I'm going to have h e r transferred to another job, where she won't have to hear men screaming," Donnell said.

"Therapy, not another job, is what she needs."

"What if the therapy destroyed something about her that may be very valuable, something that may possibly be the spearhead of the coming race?"

"What are you talking about?" Crakhorn demanded.

"She is a sensitive," Donnell answered. "She picks up stuff, via ESP, from other people. She doesn't know

she is doing this and she doesn't know what to do about it. This worries her. She gets scared."

"Umph. What about this spearhead?"

"Maybe a new race is emerging, which will have ESP naturally. Maybe she is one of the first members of that new race."

Crakhorn's grunt was louder than before. "You talk like you need therapy too," he said, gruffly.

Mrs. Crane was coming hesitantly down the hall.

"Excuse me," Busby said "I'll have to talk to her. But let's all get together and dig deeper into this thing as soon as possible."

"Sure. Let me get Rex." Donnell looked inside the office. The dog had not moved. His eyes were still fastened on the cat. The feline crouched on top of the cabinets, every hair fluffed out, its eyes yellow with hate. Donnell had the impression of some monster out of Earth's dark past, crouching there in wait. "Come on, boy." Rex lifted himself at Donnell's command.

SOMETIME during the night Donnell awakened with the conviction deep in his mind that the telephone was going to ring. Something else was in his mind too but in the fogged transition state between sleep and wakefulness, he could not quite recall what it was. Then he heard the sound again, of stealthy movement within his room. It was so slight and yet so clear that he wondered if he were hearing it with his ears. The thought itself was sufficient to startle him wide awake. As he came awake, something spat at him out of the darkness. The picture that formed instantly in his mind was of the gashes on Crane's throat, back and arms

The room was dark. The night lamp was on the head of the bed, the phone was on the night stand beside it. In the drawer of the night stand was a pistol. Donnell did not reach for the gun or the light. In his mind was the fear - - or was it knowledge? - - - that he might not get his arm back if he reached for either of these things. He lay very still, allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Very slowly, he turned his head

Something was in the room, a shadow of a shadow. Eyes looked at him out of the darkness. At the sight of those eyes, fear crawled inside his skin and wormed its way into his soul. He knew now why Crane had screamed and had kept on screaming. This was Grandfather Fear himself, the fear that lurked in Chaos and Dark Night. He lay still, not moving a muscle, and not fighting the fear.

The eyes watched him from the darkness. Hate was in the eyes, they boiled and bubbled with it, hate of him, perhaps hate of the whole human race.

"The Antagonist that comes out of Chaos and Dark Night - - - " the thought flashed across his mind. Somehow in this moment he envied Crane because Crane had been able to scream and thus discharge some of the pressure in him.

A growl came from the hall, then a heavy thud as Rex hit the door, trying to break it down, trying to get in and help him, fulfilling the ancient pact between man and dog that one shall watch while the other slept. The dog hit the closed door again and again. The eyes of the shadow flicked once in that direction, then came back to Donnell. They began to lower. Donnell could see the shadow crouching to leap.

Whaaaaannnnnnnng! Every hair on Donnell's body lifted in its socket as the telephone exploded beside the bed. Somehow, deep inside him, he knew that this was not accident, that somebody *knew* what was happening here.

The shadow spat, the yellow eyes vanished. The shadow was gone.

Donnell tumbled out of bed, jerked the door open. Rex was a fury in the bedroom. Deep growls rumbling in his

throat he searched for something that had been here.

Not until the phone had rung six times did Donnell remember to answer it. A frantic voice was in his ears. "Oh, Mr. Donnell, I hope you won't think I'm such a silly little fool for awakening you at this time of night, but I was certain that something was wrong - - - "

"I won't think you're a silly little fool, ever, Felice."

"Oh, I'm so glad "

"You just saved my life."

The girl was silent. Donnell could almost feel her perturbed thinking. "Was - - - there something with yellow eyes in your room?" Her voice was very hesitant.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"It - - - it was here a little while ago. It just looked in and went on. I - - - I think I know what it is."

"Did you see it this afternoon in Busby's office?"

"Y - - yes."

Grimness sounded in Donnell's voice. "Get dressed and I'll pick you up as quickly as I can get there." Before he dressed, he made two phone calls.

IN THE CAR, the girl crept close to him. He did not question her. Nor did Busby question either of them. It was Crakhorn, waiting impatiently in his living room, who questioned them. The psycho made no effort to conceal his opinion that he had three psychotics on his hands. "You're nuts!" Crakhorn exploded. "All three of you are nuts and ought to be hospitalized. Maybe all four of you," he added, looking at the dog.

"Where's your cat?" Donnell asked.

"Eh? What's he got to do with this?"

"Where is he?"

Crakhorn laughed. "Where any tom cat ought to be of nights, out roaming the alleys, killing dogs and making love to all the pussy cats." He seemed to find satisfaction in this thought as if these were the only reasonable activities in a world suddenly gone insane. "He'll be home by dawn. There's a hole in the kitchen wall - - - " He broke off speaking as a low growl sounded in Rex's throat and the dog tensed.

The cat was coming from the kitchen to the living room. The expression on his face said there were people in his living room and that he was coming to order them off the premises.

"Take him, Rex," Donnell said.

The dog leaped at the cat. The Maltese recoiled, snarling. His mind had been occupied by other matters and he had not realized there was a dog in the house. Yellow lightning flared from his eyes. The dog exploded in the air.

Donnell snatched the gun from his pocket. He wiped the froth of blood and plasma and tiny bits of tissue from his face as he slipped off the safety. The cat was standing in the doorway, snarling rage and hate at him. The glow from its eyes was yellow with malevolent fury. The gun jerked in Donnell's hand as he pulled the trigger. The cat spun backward through the doorway. Donnell leaped to the door. The gun thundered again in the hall. Splinters flew from the floor as the cat vanished into the kitchen.

The security officer followed, snapping on the kitchen light. A hole in the kitchen wall showed where the cat had gone. He turned back.

Crakhorn was sitting on the floor of the big living room. Busby was bending over him. Felice was standing erect. Oddly, there was no fear in her now. She had the antidote for fear now — knowledge, plus a feeling of an emerging pattern that might go out of the universe of here and now but was still a discernable pattern.

"The dog exploded," Crakhorn said. He spoke without feeling, with totally flattened affect, words said by rote. His eyes went around the room not as if he was impressing his mind with the sight so he could remember it but as if he

wanted to know what he had to occlude and forget. He began to laugh, a totally out-of-place sound.

"What's so funny?" Donnell said.

"I was just hoping he meets some more dogs," Crakhorn answered.

"What the hell is going on here?" Busby said to Donnell.

"I'll tell you later," the security officer answered. "Come on. We're going to organize a cat hunt."

"You missed?"

"Yes."

LATER, squad cars with spot lights turned on full drew up at the four corners of a block in the town of Norko. The atomic energy generating plant came close enough to owning this town to command the cooperation of the police department. The policemen did not know what they were hunting, except that it was a cat so charged with radioactivity as to be a menace to human life. The cat was here, somewhere, in this block. The police department, driven to action by Donnell, had found trailing the cat fairly simple. All they had to do was to wait until somebody called in and complained about any explosion near their home. Usually the explosions had taken place in an alley and had been preceded by, but not followed by, the barking of a dog.

The police sergeant with them was bewildered but was not asking questions. Neither Felice nor Crakhorn asked questions. They seemed to know the answers. Only Busby was still seeking an explanation.

"My guess is that the cat is a mutant," Donnell explained again. "Across history, cats have been regarded with superstitious awe This one was born in an atomic energy generating plant and was probably a mutant from the start. Also, he has unquestionably picked up additional radioactivity, by prowling around the plant. If we could get a counter near him - - -" The ancient fable of the mice wanting to bell the cat, and the problem they had faced, passed through his mind. "None of us mice is going to bell this cat either. Not if we've got good sense."

"Even the dreams of such a cat could be loaded with destruction," Felice spoke.

"Eh?" Busby said, his voice sharp.

"Supposing he is lying on your lap, purring, and you are stroking his fur. He is asleep, and dreaming. He dreams of killing dogs, or maybe a man. His dreams go that way because of the hate in him. His mutated ability function goes into operation as he dreams. Your cat is apparently asleep in your lap, but something that went out from him via his new ability is stalking the alleys."

"But - - - "

"You didn't suppose a real cat was in Mr. Donnell's room tonight, or that the real cat wounded Mr. Crane? It wasn't that at all. It was a projected cat, a sort of a bigger, stronger, tougher edition of the real cat."

"But that's not possible," Busby protested.

"He passed through my bedroom tonight," the girl answered.

"And he - - - the projected he - - - was in my bedroom tonight," Donnell said.

"Hallucination - - - "

"You saw Rex explode. Was that hallucination?"

"Please!" Crakhorn spoke. Distress, and emotional pain, were in the man. Sensing Crakhorn's feelings, Busby was silent.

Near them, the police sergeant hissed sharply.

Caught in the glare of the spotlight from the squad car, the cat was crouching in the middle of the street. The light had blinded him. The tip of his tail moved back and forth in jerky motions. Donnell slipped the gun from his pocket, started forward.

"Give me the gun," Crakhorn said.

"Eh?"

"He's *my* cat!!"

"Oh. I see." In this moment, Donnell felt a vast sympathy for this man. He released the gun. Holding the weapon behind him, Crakhorn moved forward.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty!" His voice was a harsh croak in the night.

"Crakhorn, come back here!" Busby shouted. "Let the police use the riot guns on him."

Donnell's fingers closed over the medico's shoulders as the medico started forward. Busby turned frightened eyes toward him. "That cat can blow up a human being as easily as it can blow up a dog!".

"Crakhorn knows that."

"Kitty, kitty, kitty." With one hand outstretched, Crakhorn moved slowly forward.

Donnell could hear Busby's labored breathing but the medico seemed to understand now. Behind him, the breathing of the police sergeant was also audible. In the sky overhead, a rocket coughed on a freighter outward bound for the moon. Donnell thought: *Here in this age of science, of space ships, of control of atomic energy, something out of Earth's dreadful past crouches in the street - - - -*

Dreadful past? How did he know that this thing in the street was not out of Earth's possibly *even more dreadful future?* Maybe this mutant function was not an evolutionary throw-back but was the forerunner of a coming day. *Maybe there would come a time when such cats would rule the planet Earth.*

The thought shocked Donnell to the core of his soul, to the place where the hidden screaming waited. It was exactly this thing that he really feared, that all men feared. He fought down the scream. One hypothesis was as tenable as the other. Nobody knew. In this moment it seemed to the security officer that his nerve endings were extruding through his flesh.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty - - - " Crakhorn stooped down, one hand extended, the hand with the gun behind his back. Meowing, the cat came toward him. As the cat came under his fingers, Crakhorn took the gun from behind his back, pressed the muzzle against the cat's head, and pulled the trigger.

A bundle of limp fur twitched and jumped convulsively in the street. The men and the girl moved forward. Crakhorn straightened up. He wiped his sweat from the gun and handed it to Donnell.

The sergeant stirred the limp bundle of fur with his toe. "All this fuss about an alley cat," he said, contemptuously.

Donnell caught Crakhorn's arm before he could slug the sergeant. "Easy," he said. "You had to do it."

"I'll take him," Busby said. "Come on, Crakhorn." He led the protesting psycho along the street. The sergeant stared uncomprehendingly after them.

"He loved the cat," Donnell said, in explanation. "But when you got him to the place where the chips were down, he loved something else a little more - - - his own race." He saw as he spoke that the sergeant did n o t understand. "Thank you for your cooperation, officer I'll see that your chief is advised of the way you have cooperated with the atomic energy plant this night."

Donnell moved toward his car. The girl came into step beside him. Busby had already gotten Crakhorn into the police cruiser. Donnell slid under the wheel of his own car. The girl came in at the other door and slid across the seat to sit very close to him. He sat there, not moving, not thinking, waiting, for something.

Somewhere off in the night a dog barked.

Donnell started to whistle, then caught the sound as he remembered that Rex was not barking in this night, nor in any other night, not ever again.

"Did you hear him?" the girl whispered.

"Yes."

"That's Rex. That's your dog."

"What?"

"You can still hear him barking, if you know how to listen."

"Felice!"

"Close your eyes and listen." She seemed very sure. Donnell slumped down in his seat and closed his eyes. The sound of the bark came again, closer now, like a hopeful sound echoing out of some vast infinity - - - or a challenge to Chaos and Dark Night, he did not know which. But he knew that parts of the mystery he had touched here went out of this universe of here and now, into some other universe. This did not matter. The pattern was there, even if he did not grasp all of it or understand it. Hearing that bark was enough. Somewhere in that sound was the knowledge that the future that moments earlier had possibly been ruled by cats was no longer that future. Homo sapiens and the canines would still inherit that future. A man and his dog. There was security in the knowledge and rising comfort.

He opened his eyes and pressed the starter. The car came to life.

"I'm going to get you transferred to a new position," he said. In his mind was the thought that there had never been a woman in his life. Another thought was there too, that it was time to change this.

The girl did not ask him what position he meant. She snuggled closer to him as if she understood exactly what he meant without his saying the words.

"—This is my dad calling to report I won't be in school due to a prior commitment to fly into outer space—"

The TIMELESS

87,500 Word Novel

Conclusion

If you were over 70 and found yourself made young again, you'd be a delighted man! But what if you found yourself in the role of an unscrupulous man who was involved in a desperate plot to overthrow the government, and worse still, found yourself the dupe of something unhuman, out of another dimension of Time, to which mankind of three hundred years in the future was totally enslaved? Also would it help your peace of mind to know that it was entirely up to you to kill this incredible menace out of Time in spite of the fact that History in the Future said that you had failed! To Canfield, it was a dilemma devilish beyond imagination!

MAN

By Roger Arcot

Confield's trigger reflexes had been swifter. His fingers had found Flug's nullified switch — a thunderclap burst about them, and beneath his hand, Flug's organic frame was transformed into a cloud of dust finer than any on Earth.

RESUME OF BOOK I

JAMES CANFIELD, New Harvard professor, was stunned when his young and beautiful wife, MARILYN left him. At 73, he had been "taken", and he knew it. Now he planned revenge. He converted all his assets into cash, induced an underworld surgeon to alter his features beyond recognition, had a new set of fingerprints grafted on, and then took the rocketplane to Los Angeles, enroute to South America and oblivion. He had taken the name of Oliver Brown, and now, on the plane, he found himself sitting beside another OLIVER BROWN who, almost incredibly, bore an amazing resemblance to his newly sculptured features. As the rocket roared through the stratosphere, this other Oliver Brown grew older before his eyes, and seemed desperately ill Aghast, Canfield had no time to puzzle out the riddle when the rocketplane went into a dive and crashed in the mountains.

Recovering consciousness, Canfield found himself the only survivor, and a brilliant idea came to him: why not become that other Oliver Brown? He changed clothes and identification and awaited rescue

In this world of the 21st century, atomic wars had come and gone, and a matriarchal government, already unpopular, had taken over the world. Women ruled, while men were very much in the minority. It had been this situation which had given Marilyn her right to desert and divorce him without warning.

Among the dead Oliver Brown's effects was a mysterious message in an undecipherable language signed GORKEN. Canfield remembered that this was the name Brown had called out as he died in the plane. "Gorken did this to me!" he had screamed. In another pocket had been a visigram which read simply: "Five days." and it was signed "G". Was this also Gorken?

Canfield was near death from exposure when the rescuing matriarchs arrived. He was only half aware of arriving in Los Angeles, to be claimed by two mysterious men named FLUG and SKINK. "We'll take care of Brown, he's ours," they said. Later, on an operating table, he heard the words: "We should let him die, but Gorken has commanded that he remain in the League." Awakening, Canfield found himself a young man again, about 30, with the magnificent body of an athlete! Suddenly he realized that he had to carry on his masquerade before Flug and Skink, or die. He was in something desperate. He was turned loose, told to go about his mission, which came to him as a message from a robot which read: "*Megherzteil draischilgm firzel oga scheikenkurtz.*" How could he follow instructions he could not understand.

Directed down a corridor and out a door, he stepped out into the outskirts of Los Angeles, and turned to find no building behind him, only a sun-drenched open field!

As he walked, he found that his senses had been speeded up. He moved at a blur, and other people seemed at slow-motion. He realized his time-sense was speeded up, and that he'd have to slow his motions to keep from attracting attention. But before he could collect his thoughts, he found himself prisoner in an air-cab piloted by a man named PICOZZI, who seemed to know all about him, even that his real name was Canfield.

In Picozzi's laboratory, a marvelous building hidden in another dimension approached only through a force field by means of a mysterious disk the visitor must be wearing, Canfield learned who Gorken was: something in human form, from some unknown dimension, who was out of phase with Time by 24 hours, but was gradually coming into phase. At the present time he was in-phase only five minutes out of each 24 hours, but his period of being in-phase was lengthening.

Picozzi explained himself as a "mutant", one of those people who had been changed by the atom war. He had for instance, a heart twice as large as the normal human being. Born in Latin America, he was an atom scientist. He explained that he had met another mutant, a grossly fat monstrosity of a man named JOHN PICKENS, who was able to hear "voices". These voices, it turned out, were real voices, out of the future, 300 years away. The owners of the voices, known to Picozzi as "the Ones", lived in a world enslaved by Gorken, who now not only ruled Earth but other planets as well. The "Ones" were trying to change the "time track" in the 21st century and find a man capable of killing Gorken, before he became sufficiently "in phase" to complete his subjugation of the human race. They had finally, through their "chronoprobes", found that man - - James Canfield. They had, by hypnotic suggestion, caused Canfield to do all the things he had done, so that he might take over the identity of Oliver Brown, financial tycoon and member of Gorken's League which was eventually to overthrow the Matriarchy and rule the world.

Now, in Picozzi's laboratory, they talked to Canfield direct, over the centuries, via Picozzi's "time communicator". "Will you work with us to kill Gorken?" they asked.

Picozzi explained, when contact had been broken with the Ones, that Oliver Brown had been 113 years old, and had been rejuvenated by Gorken several times, for a variety of years never revealed in advance. Canfield could have no idea of how long his own rejuvenation might last - - it might be 100 days or 100 years.

Having no other choice, Canfield agrees to join the Ones, and is told there is one other member, besides Picozzi, whose identity must be kept secret. Since the real Oliver Brown was something of a roue, Picozzi advises Canfield to visit Strip Town in Los Angeles before returning to his Kansas City business empire. Picozzi translates the message from Gorken which says the next meeting of the League is in Denver; a matriarch spy has infiltrated Brown's corporation; he must be uncovered and destroyed; and the penalty of failure is loss of immortality! Picozzi also says the Ones have given Canfield post-hypnotic knowledge which will tell him all he needs to know as the occassion arises, and have also given him a weapon that he will be able to use when he finally faces Gorken.

In Strip Town, he sees a very lovely woman who does not see him, and he remembers her as a girl he had seen in a tri-d photo he'd found on Brown's body. As the lights go out for an exotic nude dance in the Strip Town nightclub, a woman's voice warns him of Gorken's threat of loss of immortality and when the lights go on again the girl in the tri-d photo has vanished.

Back in his room at the hotel Canfield tries to go to sleep, but suddenly realizes something horrible is in the room with him. It is Gorken, he is sure. He senses the absolute zero of outer space, and an awful terror. Then it is gone, and as it goes, Canfield knows that now his resolve is firm - - he will dedicate his life to killing Gorken.

Now go on with the story:

If you missed Book 1 of The Timeless Man, don't let it annoy you! Just send 10c to cover the cost of handling, and we will send you a copy of the June issue entirely free! Address your letter to "Ray Palmer, Amherst, Wisconsin", and your copy will come to you by return mail!

JACKSON Space station lay just outside the perimeter of metropolitan Kansas City, a few miles to the east of the old Grandview Stratoport.

The wealthy community owed its name to the fact it had once served as a launching site for those early rocket vessels that supplied and serviced the atomic satellites of the previous century.

The region was still rich in historical interest. Many of the local names on the land paid tribute to the early pioneers of space: Von Braun Boulevard, Ley Memorial Park, Goddard Square.

All this the new Oliver Brown noted from a travel guide and memorized before he arrived by monorail from Los Angeles at seven in the morning. A twin-rotor convertiplane limousine, piloted by a uniformed chauffeur in a gold jacket, met him at the monorail terminal.

The chauffeur, a dour man in his fifties, presented Canfield - - - luckily - - - with the chance to avoid his first fumble. As soon as the latter was born up to the surface platform by escalator from the rail yards, the servant detached himself from the waiting crowd and strode up to him: "Mr. Brown, I'm Yudkin, your new pilot - - - "

Canfield looked him over. "How'd you know I was coming?"

"Miss Luzanne visicalled the home, sir. She told us you would be arriving today."

"I see," said Canfield.

He wondered who in the name of thunder Miss Luzanne was? How had she gotten track of his movements? Complicated business, this stepping into another man's shoes - - - the small things could trip him up. Damn it, Picozzi had told him that the necessary information would instantly materialize in his brain - - - whenever it was needed. Yet so far, it hadn't. Apparently, no facts whatsoever had been planted in his memory about either Yudkin or the mysterious Miss Luzanne, although Yudkin's case automatically explained itself.

He stepped inside the convertiplane. Before Yudkin could slide into the pilot's compartment up in front, Canfield handed him two yellow tickets.

"My baggage," he said. "Get it now."

"Yes, sir," The chauffeur-pilot saluted and walked back into the terminal.

Canfield inhaled the bracing spring-spiced air that reached him after it swept across the grassy lawn of a nearby mall. Something about the vivid greenness of his present surroundings evoked a longing for the leafy elms and broad parks of New Harvard.

He wondered how long it would take Yudkin. The baggage was light; only a dozen or so light-weight comfortable pieces of apparel that he'd had made on rush order in California. Gaudy affairs judging by old-fashioned standards when paler shades were worn, but eminently fitting now for a man of his present youth and high social stature. Even so, Canfield - - - instinctively - - - conservative - - - had used more restraint than a rejuvenated Brown might have. No more than three of the suits, for example, were self-luminescent.

Presently, Yudkin returned. He was followed by a mechanical redcap carrying Canfield's bags in arms stretched out ahead of it like snowplows. The chauffeur directed the placing of the gear in a rear compartment, then moved in behind the wheel. Seconds later, the overhead blades commenced whirling and the ground slipped away from underneath the plane. With a grunt, it reached for the sky.

At one thousand feet, the aerial limousine jockeyed for a place in the first level traffic pattern. As it broke into the stream, the hubs of the twin rotors swung forward and settled vertically into nacelles in the wings, thus transforming the blades into conventional props. Now, the plane thrust forward at hypoed velocity.

Canfield occupied himself by mentally recording the varied and changing ter-

rain below. The massive city seemed to spread endlessly over perceptibly rolling hills, cut in a dozen directions by great elevated freeways paved with shining white concrete. Occasionally, the intra-city speed lanes cloverleafed off to funnel surface traffic into skyscraper apartment circles where a dozen monolithic ant-heaps rose to the clouds in each community.

The plane continued to wing southward. The terrain underneath flattened out; the crowded metropolis yielded to small clean suburbs.

Then abruptly, all semblance of civilization vanished. Habitations disappeared. The roads below ended - - - except for one great express highway that thundered across the green land several miles to the west of where Canfield now flew.

Directly beneath him stretched a pure wilderness, partially cleared and converted into grazing land. It was bounded - - - as Canfield soon discovered - - - by a high metal-mesh fence. The barrier reached at least twenty feet above the ground and judging by the towers that broke into it at half-mile intervals, it was electrified throughout. The fence apparently began at some point toward the east that was farther than the eye could see. It ran to the highway, right-angled sharply at that point, and then followed the freeway toward the south, again vanishing in the distance. Canfield reckoned that the total land enclosed would amount to several townships, or even possibly counties.

Suddenly, his eyes spotted movement on the blurring terrain as it slid by, directly below him. He made out splotches of brown against the green earth, which he quickly recognized for cattle - - - but what cattle! The light allowed him enough perspective that he could compute the size of the animals in comparison to their surroundings. He saw they dwarfed many of the scrubby trees left on the pastures. A quick rundown of his calculations showed they were probably eight to nine times the weight of old-time cattle - - - which meant that *they were tetraploids!*

Canfield unconsciously sucked in his breath. Below him - - - he now realized - - - stretched the feeding ranges of an enormous polyploid farm, where jumbo meat animals of all kinds were raised!

So this was what Juano Picozzi had meant when he said, "From now on, *amigo*, you are a meat producer on a gigantic scale!" The tremendous farm belonged, without doubt, to Oliver Brown; it had been - - - probably - - - only one of his many properties.

Now, Canfield's straining eyes made out other details on the land. Smaller creatures bounded out of the bush. Rabbits - - but rabbits the size of shepherd dogs. These would be experimental creatures released to see how they would readapt to the wild after having been bred to the greater size. Such enlarged animals could be as formidable as kangaroos when aroused in battle, Canfield understood, since their heritage of timid instincts was no longer necessary for survival.

Ahead loomed an entire cluster of buildings. In fact, a self-sufficient community, constructed out of the materials of glass, steel and plasto-concrete. Barns as gigantic as aircraft hangars lined the periphery of the area. Then came a number of glass-fronted cylindrical structures, some doubling as office buildings but the majority serving apparently as homes for workers. The central section of the community consisted of a well-kept park area and a gleaming rectangular residence, massive in size. At this very moment, it appeared that the convertiplane was proposing to settle down on the flat roof of the last-named building.

Canfield noted that the aerial limousine was speedily losing altitude. The blades again were churning horizontally.

Below, the central building swung closer. A few seconds later, Yudkin had set the rotored plane down on the ground cushion, that billowing mass of air that piles up under a descending rotor when it nears a landing surface. Gradually, while the ship hovered, the pilot decreased his speed until the cushion dispersed.

As soon as the craft had settled and braked to a halt, Canfield stepped down out of the limousine. Two figures who had been standing near a shallow stairwell that led down into the building immediately advanced across the roof. A rather fat human and a typical house robot.

The fat man was garbed somewhat sedately in a drab orange uniform of skylon. As he neared, he said: "Good day, Mr. Brown. Welcome home. I am Farson, your new majordomo and this - - - " he indicated the android " - - - is, of course, a house butler. It is fresh from the factory. We've tried to bring a little order out of chaos for you, but with a brand new staff - - - " Farson shrugged " - - - well, you know how it is."

"I think I do," said Canfield.

"Thank you," Farson said. "I hope you'll be pleased with us."

ANOTHER new man - - - the same as Yudkin. What was the deal here? Canfield recalled Gorken's warning in the message relayed to him at the clinic: *Draischilgin! A spy has infiltrated your corporation.* Did that mean in his home here or among the office organization? Or did it mean among the farm staff? It was impossible to tell yet, not until he first found out just how vast Brown's personal empire was and what other corporations it might possibly interlock.

He started walking with the majordomo toward the stairwell. Farson said at his side: "Most of the new androids have been indoctrinated. However, we had to return a couple that were badly defective. Oberly, the farm foreman, has kept in constant touch with me. He says the new annex is nearly constructed. And - - - oh yes, Mr. Brown, several visi-messages have come in. Board meetings you're supposed to attend. Miss Luzanne said to hold them. Neither of us knew, naturally, where to get in touch - - - "

An ear-splitting roar suddenly mushroomed behind the two men, drowning out the rest of Farson's words. Simultaneously, a blast of scorching heat singed through Canfield's clothes. Before he could react, a powerful shock wave that came a fraction of a second later had tumbled him flat on his face on the hard roof floor. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a tongue of bright blue-hot flame whoosh toward the sky.

"What in the name of God - - - !"

At his side, Farson began cursing.

Canfield scrambled to his knees. He stumbled again, fell, then leaped to his feet. Impelled by hair-trigger instincts, he dived for the stairwell. A shrill klaxon like alarm suddenly started screaming from somewhere. Farson, bruised and bleeding, pitched over the unguarded steps and fell beside him. The majordomo's breath came in great gasps. His small eyes reflected fear, amazement.

Presently, the gale of super-heated air blew itself out over the two men's heads. Other than the crackling of flame, no more noise was heard from the scene of the explosion. However, the klaxon continued screaming.

Canfield decided it was now safe to peek at the damage. He cautiously raised his head above the roof level and sought out the spot where the convertiplane limousine had been parked.

The scene was a ghastly holocaust in miniature. Blown to a thousand fragments, the wreckage of the plane was scattered over half the area of the roof.

A scorched glowing hole had been gouged into the concrete slab at the very center of the explosion, ripping out and

twisting the reinforcement rods buried just under the surface. The air reeked with the smell of neo-thermite. Overhead, the sky was empty of attackers.

A few feet off stood the house butler bowed on one knee. The shellac was cracked and peeling on the robot's face and its arms were askew at an impossible angle Some large fragment out of the flying debris had cannonballed through its metal plated chest. From the gaping hole dangled a sickening array of wheels, cogs, uncoiled springs.

Yudkin, the chauffeur pilot, was nowhere to be seen - - - until Canfield's horrified eyes made out a sticky unnatural sort of crimson fluid which was intermingled with the scattered chunks of torn metal. He realized that enough of Yudkin would never be found to cramp even the smallest of coffins

Farson was panting heavily. He moved up beside Canfield and said, "People told me you had enemies, sir. However, I never supposed any of them'd try sky-bombing you - - - "

"So now you discover the world has a few more surprises," Canfield replied, drily.

He stood up, climbed out of the stairwell and strode a few feet closer to the scene of the explosion.

"That was no pin-point bombing out of the blue," he disclosed after he had completed a few second's survey. "The plane, itself, was rigged. Neo-thermite warhead, no bigger than my thumb - - - " Canfield crooked the digit of his left hand to emphasize the smallness he meant " - - - strapped to the inside of the instrument panel. Favorite device of saboteurs a few years ago. The booby-trap is wired to some particular dial. When the needle hits a certain reading, the warhead's detonated - - - " his young features grinned, now fully recovered from shock and apprehension of death " - - - and curtains ring down for anybody in the neighborhood. Neat, huh, Farson?"

Farson's own chubby face was pale. He said: "Sorry about Yudkin, sir."

"Me, too. Check on his dependents for me - - - and I'll take care of them."

"Yes, sir."

Canfield turned on his heel and strode back toward the stairwell. The mind behind his composed face was boiling. The attempted assassination had bared a new element in the game. Oliver Brown, it appeared, had a few little private enemies of his own. Men who were probably unaware of his membership in the League, but who had occasion to hate him for other misdeeds in his dark past - - - a past only three years long, at that.

Was the spy mentioned in Gorken's message also one of those secret enemies? Canfield wondered He knew one thing for certain. Accelerated as his alertness already was, he would have to double and redouble the defenses of his body - - - until his instincts and reflexes equalled that of the most sensitive nerve-quivering jungle animal.

FOR the second time in a quarter of an hour, he started to descend the stairs that led from the damaged roof to the residential quarters below. This time as he did, a veil gradually lifted from his brain - - - as if a cloud had passed from his memory, lifting him out of the twilight.

True, he had not been aware - - - up to now - - - of living in darkness. But just the same, a dazzling ray of light broke for him - - - and his mind merged with the stolen mind of the dead Brown.

Simultaneously, recognition of his new surroundings keyed buried memories the Ones had evidently planted in his mind by super-hypnosis. Memories scheduled to awaken to life at just such a moment. They were memories that had belonged to the former proprietor of this empire, recorded scenes and incidents that had made up much of the aura of his personality

For this was *his* home now, thought Canfield. His own home. He was as much Brown as Oliver Brown, himself, had ever been. As he passed the floors going down, each level became ultra-familiar to him, became part and parcel of his past life.

He was still James Canfield; but he was just as equally Oliver Brown, the master of a fortune that amounted to nearly fifty million credits. For almost twenty years, he had lived in this great rectangular house, a retreat equipped with all the labor-saving, time-saving gadgets that twenty-first century science could invent. The first seventeen of those years he had lived here under a different identity - - - though the same name; then, when Gorken had summoned him for rejuvenation, he'd faked his own death and arranged for himself to return as his own heir. Three years later now, he'd obeyed the latest summons for rejuvenation

As the stairs continued to lead him downward, Canfield remembered other things. The residence boasted four levels. The top floor here included a glass-walled solarium, a fully-equipped gymnasium for workouts, a hydroponic garden and a private laboratory. Just beyond this hallway now, he would find a moving escalator - - - and here immediately to his right, a vertical shaft by which he could descend at a quicker rate if he chose. He so chose.

The third floor, now coming up to him, included a living suite, several bedrooms, a dining suite and kitchen. In a moment he had passed it. The second floor - - - library, den, screening room, servants' quarters, game room - - - came into view

Finally, he arrived at the first level - - - offices, communications room, bar. Canfield stepped out of the shaft and hurried down a plush-carpeted corridor to that suite which housed the nerve-centers of his own personal organization. The inner sanctum he recalled so well from his borrowed memories. Farson, the majordomo, followed closely at his heels.

Now, Canfield began to understand the *why* of the change of servants. Brown had wanted no suspicion aroused. Before he left for his operation at the League clinic, he'd anticipated that the slight alteration of his physical appearance might arouse speculation among his servants. Friends and business comrades, he had not worried about. He knew that it would be simple to fool the world at large, but there was no logical reason why he should take chances with those he dwelt among in intimacy.

Hence, he had paid the servants off and sent them away, all those who resided in the big house with him. Even the robots, for a few of the more complex types possessed positronic visual-recorders which might preserve valuable information the matriarchs could intercept and make use of.

The electronic lock on the suite was keyed to the loops and whorls of Canfield's index finger. He pushed the underpad of the finger's top joint against the crystal knob. Warmth developed, flowed under the skin, registering the pattern on a tiny scanner inside the crystal. A relay flipped into position. Tumblers fell. The massive door of solid beryllium steel swung open

Nothing inside had changed. The wide polished desk of mahogany, the intercom visiscreen by which he could scan operations going on anywhere in the community, the rows of books and video reels on a shelf opposite him; the inlaid panels of deep-tone plastic - - - all were exactly as he remembered having left them

Canfield's mind reeled. Was he James Canfield, or was he Brown? Had the Ones projected him into a complete loss of personal identity?

Farson, who had disappeared for a moment, returned with a sheath of visigrams. "These have been piling up, Mr.

Brown."

Canfield looked the papers over. He absorbed the contents of each at a glance. All were facsimile copies, he noted. Each was initialed: "Filed and Ans'd - - - A." The messages were mostly production reports or notices of board meetings.

Who was "A" he wondered? Damnably odd, the information he required didn't materialize instantly in his mind as the other data had. What was wrong? Some psych block, most likely.

He brought out his key chain, opened the top drawer of his desk, took out paper and a stylo - - -

And a stereo-prism that was identical with the one in his pocket.

A new bank of memory cells inside him shook off their lethargy. They flooded his brain with awakened knowledge. Before him, in the prism, glowed a face that now seemed as familiar to him as his own

"A" was Ann Luzanne - - - the vivacious red-haired girl in the other trimensional photo. The girl who was his right arm in Oliver Brown, Incorporated; the green-eyed beauty in the Radium Cabana.

FOLLOWING his explosive arrival at his headquarters near Jackson Space Station, James Canfield spent the next few days in reestablishing a strong grasp on the reins of Oliver Brown's stock-raising, meat-producing empire. Fortunately, he was uninterrupted by activities from either Gorken and the League on one hand - - - or Juano Picozzi and the Ones on the other.

The polyploid farm where he maintained his home and control center was - - - he learned - - - only one of a dozen corporate ranches in the empire, devoted to the grazing or feeding of triploid and tetraploid meat animals. The others he owned were scattered through the resodded grasslands of Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas and Texas.

As he roamed over his property in inspection tours, Canfield observed that the herds of mature polyploids consisted for the most part of extra-developed cattle. But the pens also enclosed hogs as large as hippos and sheep worthy of shearing by Paul Bunyan. Each day, the corporation shipped carloads of animals by monorail freight to the enormous packing centers at Kansas City and Omaha to be converted into beefsteaks, hams and mutton.

Brown's workers bred the huge livestock by means of chromosome duplication. Injections of chemicals that were derived from massive complex compounds similar to radioactive colchicine caused the germ cells to double or triple their pairs of chromosomes at the time of fertilization. The animals thus produced would breed true for two generations, but they inevitably became sterile in the third.

Although he was up at zero five thirty each morning, Canfield found he seldom suffered any pressing need for sleep. Nor for relaxation either, though he generally stayed up until the following midnight.

His slim-powerfully muscled body was in fine trim. His senses retained the acuteness he had noticed and enjoyed on that first day he awoke - - - restored to youth - - - in the League clinic. And difficult as the many problems involved in managing so vast an enterprise proved to be, he succeeded in solving most of them swiftly as his underlings presented them for his attention. His mind unraveled equations and completed computations at a speed rivaling that of an accounting robot. In even the most complex contracts presented to him to sign, his eyes instantly ferreted out any jokers in small type. And the visiscreen scanning system set up over the community enabled him to maintain a constant check on every phase of the local operation.

However, despite the fact he felt no urgent need for relaxation, Canfield ear-

ly recognized one thing. If he were going to play the role of Brown faithfully, it would be wise to seek a little respite from his duties - - - and to do so in the same manner Brown would have. Taking his cue from this logic, Canfield therefore worked out a new physical schedule that he began to follow rigorously.

Each day at ten, he exercised. Blinding exercises, violent gymnastics, full-throttle boxing. Then for fifteen minutes, he fenced with a master swordsman for an instructor - - - a rapier-skilled mutant with an uncanny speed of attack.

At fourteen hundred, Canfield would twirl in the visicast channels for news of the world or a look-in on the talkative sessions of the national Congress, dominated as always by the fashion-setting matriarch senators.

Later in the afternoon, he might take out a small copter and fly over his estates, swooping low to note the conditions of the herds or to spot any breaks in the giant electrified fence.

In the evenings, he would frequent the Polyploid Club in Kansas City or take the fifty-minute monorail down to St. Louis, to gamble on and cheer the slam-bang surface-jet races. However, he curbed any flamboyancy in his behavior. Oliver Brown had been careful with his fifty millions and Canfield observed the wisdom that lay in the course. He avoided privately-chartered monorails, space-yacht cruisers, and the other expensive hobbies of his class.

In many respects, this new life of his proved to be a full one and a pleasant one. But "lull" it was and lull it could not be expected to remain, Canfield knew. Major forces were slowly massing into action: Gorken arrayed on one side, the Ones on the other . . . it was only a matter of time until the lull should explode in bitter violence.

Anyway a man looked at it, thought Canfield, the situation was curiously parallel to resting on a pile of plutonium as it slowly approached fissionable mass.

ON the nineteenth day, the crammed but idyllic routine at the stock farm was interrupted by the appearance of a slim racing copter. Flashing knife-like blades, it soared in from the cloudless blue bowl of sky to the north.

The scanning net that guarded the approaches to the community informed Canfield of the plane's approach. He rushed from his office to wait the copter's landing on the roof where his own convertiplane had blown up three weeks earlier.

No sign of that earlier incident or the gouged hole the explosion created remained. Plasto-concrete had speedily been used to repair the flat surface, and the roof was again as smooth as any of the flight ramps of the great metropolitan stratedromes.

A moment after Canfield had come up the stairwell, Farson, the majordomo, also emerged on the roof. The fat man walked over and stood by Canfield's side. "Looks like Miss Luzanne's whirljob," he commented.

The remark acted to couple two unconnected links of information in Canfield's brain, and thus to unlock another memory in his overlaid consciousness. He recalled - - - as Brown would have - - - that the shining copter was a gift he had bestowed on Ann Luzanne six months previous. That was the day they celebrated a coup in La Paz, a luxurious ten-year contract to supply the Bolivian army with triploid meat.

In fact, he now remembered, that was also the day he had asked Ann to - - -

He hesitated

Asked her to *what?*

A shadow suddenly gnawed at him. He was sure there was something he had asked Ann that afternoon when they'd flown down to Lake Titicaca and stood by the cold sheet of water in the bright sunshine. But, his superimposed memory refused to divulge what it was he had said. Why was this one thing hidden from him?

Perhaps, he suspected, it was impossible for any science - - - no matter how advanced - - - not even the science developed by those desperate minds who had contacted him from the twenty-fourth century - - - to completely encamp all of one man's memories upon another man's brain

The copter settled through the ground cushion. The blades stopped whirling. A second later, the solitary lovely figure of Ann Luzanne got out.

At sight of her, Canfield felt a sudden change of pulse, a rising of heartbeat. This new emotion represented the first uncontrollable defection in his body since the day of rejuvenation.

Now, Ann looked toward him. The sun caught the red glints of her hair, burnished them to polished gold. She wore a knee-length sports tunic of pale green, and a bright green fur-trimmed cloak. However, she wore no jewelry, bangles, ornaments of any kind - - - except the customary collar-band radio, which was a smaller more expensive model than Canfield's

A small smile lingered on her full lips as Canfield moved closer.

"Hello, Oliver," she said. "I hope you enjoyed your vacation as much as you let me enjoy mine. And the new staff - - - I hope they've worked out all right for you?"

Canfield searched for deeper meanings behind her polite words. His gaze took in the bright reserved expression on her piquant features. What was his relationship with her? Or vice-versa. Was it purely business - - - or was she also Brown's sexual partner. The latter suspicion hurt - - - even though Canfield was well aware the mores of this generation did not dovetail with those of the generation in which he had matured. But Oliver Brown, constantly fortified with youth, would have adapted easily to the changing times, he reflected bitterly.

Irritated, Canfield sought to sweep the suspicion from his mind. Then suddenly, Ann came into his arms. Her rich red lips brushed his. For a moment, he thought - - -

And then he realized the kiss was soft - - - soft and without passion. Furthermore, the slim-curved body so close to him was behaving even more discreetly in embrace.

No, they were not lovers. He felt she was playing some obscure role of her own. Most likely a harmless one, in view of the deadliness of the game elsewhere. She was probably just an ambitious girl with a fine business mind, a girl who wanted to get ahead in a world where her own sex was the most competitive. But, she was not willing to dilute her drive with willing sex appeal.

He liked her, Canfield thought. He really liked her. He hurried to tell her of the important happenings since his own return. How the convertiplane had been destroyed by a concealed bomb, how Yudkin had died, how he now occasionally suffered curious "blankings-out" of memory.

Ann answered: "You said something like that would happen - - - that the operation on your brain would be delicate"

"I'll need your assistance."

She smiled. "I'll help you as much as I can." Her eyes followed him. "You haven't forgotten one thing, have you, Oliver? About us?"

The venomous suspicion returned in full force. A tremor of hate surged through Canfield's body, aimed at the dead man whose home and position he was occupying.

"About us?" he echoed, jealous of a sudden light he fancied he now saw in her eyes.

"We're engaged," Ann replied. Her voice assumed a flat hurt tone. "Don't you remember?"

He stared at her blankly.

"We planned to be buro-mated in the fall. But if you want out - - - " Can-

field thought he detected relief voiced in this last statement of hers.

"Lord help me," he said. "The most important thing in my whole life - - - and the surgeon's knife has to scrape it out of me!" He rubbed his hand against his forehead. "How could I forget?"

Ann watched him anxiously. "Then, you still want me - - - ?"

"If it came to a choice, I'd give up everything I own for you," Canfield answered. Surprisingly enough, he thought, he meant it.

Ann Luzanne's lids opened slowly. She regarded him with an undisguised astonished stare, as if she were just now seeing him for the first time in her life. "You really mean that, don't you, Oliver?"

Before Canfield could reply, Farson - - - who had been standing cautiously at a distance - - - now came nearer.

"Sorry to interrupt you, sir," the fat man said. "A visigram just came in for you - - - marked urgent."

"Better take care of it, darling," Ann whispered. "Besides, we shouldn't carry on in front of the hired help - - - which I really am, too," she added, "until I marry the boss - - - "

The visigram was in cipher. Canfield went down to his private office, took the message into the communications room. There, he fed the jumbled letters into the receiving banks of a fifteen feet long decoding machine. Barely one minute later, the intricate cipher was unraveled and returned, printed on tape Canfield had no doubt the internal operation of the machine had required several million substitution-shifts to translate the communication, however.

The actual message turned out to be framed in Draconian. It said only: "Meghartunzteil."

Canfield's mind quickly translated: "You are ordered to attend the next council, nine days from now in Denver."

That was soon, he thought, dreadfully soon. He would need preparation. An apprehensive chill began to ice his thinking processes, turning his mind momentarily into the reactive defensive mechanism of a trapped animal.

By a supreme effort of will, he broke off the spell and got a grip on himself. He could fight the panic for a while, but he couldn't help wondering: where was Juano Picozzi? Why didn't he show up to instruct him further?

DURING the remainder of the day, Canfield and Ann Luzanne maintained an impersonal and business-like relation with each other.

Ann, Canfield now remembered, held the title of secretary-treasurer in Oliver Brown, Inc. The corporation had originally hired her away from a video agency on the strongest of recommendations. Gradually, by dint of super-efficiency, she had worked her way up through several promotions, each in swifter order than the one preceding, until finally she came directly to Brown's own attention. Brown had promptly elevated her to her current position.

Canfield discovered another trait he liked In contrast to so many young women of the matriarch culture, Ann never neglected her feminity. It was quite obvious she enjoyed cosmetics, perfumes - - - and, male company.

Conference followed conference during the hectic afternoon. Many of the gatherings were conducted by multiple visi-screen projection which brought into the room executives from the other cities where units of Brown's far-flung empire were located. For Canfield, it was his first personal contact with many of these high paid brains of his. Ann Luzanne proved her value beyond the slightest doubt by slipping him notes and information that got him past rough spot after rough spot - - - and by the time evening finally rolled around, he had flashed her more than one smile of sheer gratitude.

That evening, he took her to dine at the Polyploid Club. Here, their relationship altered, became subtly more personal. Under the soft subdued lights of the glassed-in terrace which diluted none of the brilliant glow of the stars outside, Ann broke down, melted, became a gay personality - - - a girl of a hundred vibrations, unpredictable but keen and alert to the joys and defects alike of her modern world.

Her talk was spiced with the latest subjects for chit-chat, gossip about personalities in the world spotlight, entertainment and politics. Yet a certain reserve seemed to keep her from responding to Canfield completely, no matter how he tried to break through it.

Perhaps, his skill was too rusty, he thought. Though public kissing or even stronger overtures of lovemaking and desire were no longer frowned upon, Ann surrendered only the slightest of intimacies.

Always, she skillfully managed to turn the conversation away from herself, leaving Canfield's curiosity about her inner self whetted without satisfaction. Probably, he was puzzling her by his probing. Brown, he supposed, would have already known every last detail of her life - - - and not needed to dig in any further.

They dawdled over dessert - - - seedless fleshy grapes as large as peaches which were peeled and eaten with a spoon. Ann suddenly looked up. "You must be more careful in the future, Oliver. That thing that happened to Yudkin frightens me terribly - - - "

"I reported the explosion to the matriarch police," Canfield said. "They didn't seem particularly interested. Held it from the public, of course - - - but that's not uncommon, either."

"No, it isn't," Ann admitted.

"Somebody's out to get me evidently. But they're using the wrong psychology"

"How is that?"

Canfield turned his collar-band radio down to zero. Melody was nice to have around, but there were times - - -

"Remember the first of the big wars?" he said. "The one with the Nazis in it?"

"Of course. World War II."

"England was heavily bombed in that one. Not like later in the century when the hydrogen bombs hit, but then, terror is only relative to what you've experienced - - - and for the people in those first raids, the bombing by the Axis was the ultimate in nerve-wracking pain."

"I've seen old-fashioned projecto-films of the battles," said Ann. She shuddered. "Their concrete shelters looked so weak and primitive - - - "

"Toward the end of that war," Canfield continued, "England's enemy started launching a new aerial weapon that dealt the population undreamed-of devastation. Buzz-bombs they were called - - - and the clumsy fighter planes of the day were virtually helpless to shoot them down."

"But as I recall, the buzz-bombs didn't last long," said Ann. "Something called the V-2's took their place. Weren't they more terrible?"

"No," said Canfield.

"But why not?"

"Because the element of suspense was eliminated"

"How, Oliver? I fail to see - - - "

"You could hear the buzz-bombs coming at you. You had time to tremble, time to wonder if this was the chunk of explosive with your name written on it. You lived a lifetime of fear until the missile landed somewhere else. But the V-2 was different. It came upon you, as noiseless and invisible as an angel of death. If you happened to hear one, then you were safe - - - the loaded warhead had landed somewhere else."

"How dreadful."

"No more so than the Atomic Wars. The generals learned they had to re-

equip the shells so they would scream in flight. All types of noise had to be generated in battle - - - otherwise the ranks of the enemy wouldn't wind up sufficiently demoralized to crumble under attack. That's why I say - - - if my enemies are planning a campaign of fear against me, they should get smart, employ more whoop-te-do, more noise, warn me the bombs are coming I don't claim to be immune to fright - - - they might have a good chance of paralyzing me - - - "

Ann's hand crept into Canfield's. "Perhaps it's a good thing your enemies don't analyze their campaigns as well as you."

"Perhaps - - - " he said.

Then, he thought of Gorken. Gorken, unknown and unknowable, mysterious and silent. Gorken could be his enemy this very moment - - - and the summons to Denver a trap to punish a traitor.

How could a man possibly plot effective moves against an opponent who packed the advantage - - - twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes out of every day - - - of being just exactly twenty-fours ahead of him?

JAMES CANFIELD and Ann Luzanne were matching Italian foils with each other in the fencing room of Canfield's gymnasium two days later, when Farson entered waving a non-coded visigram.

Canfield opened it up, then turned to Ann, elated. The message spelled a windfall of extra business for Oliver Brown, Inc. Two buyers from countries located on the Pacific Seaboard of the Latin Belt were arriving in Miami that same afternoon. Before exploring the market further, they wanted to confer with Brown, first. Could he rocket down?

Canfield maintained in his head a schedule of all flights out of the local space terminals. Without interrupting the rhythm of lunge, parry and riposte, he suggested to Ann: "We can leave as late as an hour from now - - - and still set down on Dade County Stratoport by nineteen hundred. I think we better flame south and soap up our customers a little."

"I'll make arrangements," Ann replied. She smiled, dropped under Canfield's blade, and scored a brilliant point on the electrified screen of her opponent's padded chest. "You fence much better than you used to, Oliver. Almost like a new man - - - "

The two engaged blades again. Canfield replied with a whirling attack which Ann parried and counter-parried with desperate skill. But to no avail. As she fell back, hit after hit was scored against her and electrically recorded by an android umpire.

Finally, Canfield called a halt. Both were still breathing easily and lightly despite their furious mock combat. Ann Luzanne's eyes glowed with admiration. "I repeat what I said a minute ago," she told him. "You've certainly changed - - - "

Just as suddenly, a shadow flitted across her face. She unwrapped the long piece of tape that bound the foil tightly against her wrist, then turned away and hung the weapon up. Her complexion, Canfield observed, had drained of all color.

SINCE Yudkin's death, Canfield had not hired a new chauffeur-pilot. He preferred to fly or drive his own vehicles. He relished the feeling of personal freedom it gave him to wing through the clouds by himself, then to swoop down in a breath-taking pass over the herds of bellowing tetraploid cattle that roamed his great range.

As he regained his former skills, a sense of fierce exultation often came back to him. His muscles, it seemed, had never forgotten their old abilities. The motor responses had merely

lain buried in engram circuits while his mind grew fallow. But now, the patina of old age was removed from his sinews. New strength that heightened his trained skills to a degree he would never have supposed possible surged through his body.

Thirty minutes after the fencing match, Canfield was flying to Jackson Space Station in a trim sleek jet racer. At his side, Ann Luzanne hugged a sealed briefcase full of information.

When he came within sight of the gleaming white runways of the huge stratodome, Canfield banked sharply to the right The racer dropped rapidly, then broke into the traffic pattern of the neighboring terminal, a field which handled all local air traffic.

During the short flight, Ann had been relatively silent. Canfield wondered if something he'd said or done had upset her. Behind her odd changes of temperament lurked an enigma which he didn't know quite how to solve.

At times for example, he had found himself as baffled with her feminine ways as he had been with Marilyn in the months he'd lived with her. That shouldn't have been, for in this new relationship no real age barrier existed. For all practical purposes, he and Ann came from identical generations. She couldn't know his true past, unless - - - and the thought for some reason filled him with horror - - - she suspected the existence of the League and what sort of merchandise was sold to members like Oliver Brown . . .

They landed and parked the jet racer. Then, Canfield and Ann walked together into the space terminal. Here, they picked up their robot-stamped reservations at the ticket windows. They rode a belt out to the boarding ramp to await the call for passengers to mount the platform of the Miami-Havana rocket.

Canfield was reminded somehow of that spring-chilled morning in New Harvard when he had gone out to take his seat on the rocket for California.

In this new place of excitement, there swarmed the same mass of endless humanity, bound for fifty thousand different destinations Here was the same noise, chatter, confusion that had disturbed and exhilarated him that previous day. Nothing had changed; nothing for these fifty thousand others. Yet, in the space of weeks what a fantastic circus life had become for him.

An enormously-amplified voice floated through the air. The Miami rocket was ready to be filled.

Canfield and Ann pushed forward. In two minutes, they had checked their names with the line hostess and found a pressure compartment together inside the long bullet-shaped vessel. They had strapped themselves into their seats in anticipation of the blast.

Seconds later, the rocket swooshed down the runway on jets and lifted gracefully into the air. At three thousand feet, noise wracked the ship. All the lateral tubes fired at once. Simultaneously, the shimmering vessel leaped upward at an immensely-increased velocity.

Canfield's body writhed, tortured like the others under the impact of acceleration. But though he writhed, he did not lose consciousness. He was surprised to find that despite the crushing weight imposed on him, he could even turn his head . . . could almost rise from the enveloping folds of his seat.

He glanced at Ann. Her eyes were closed, her white features flattened. With a supreme effort of consciously-directed will, he fought off the effect of the sextupled gravities. Soon, he was able to loosen his straps and rise to his feet. Ann remained unconscious. He arched and craned his head. In the other compartments beyond, he could make out the recumbent forms of more passengers. All were in a state of sus-

pension.

The strange scene built in Canfield the illusion that he was trapped in a ghost rocket, a disembodied machine pushing onward in never-ending flight to some yet-undetermined infinity.

In seconds, he knew, the acceleration would diminish, flight velocity having been attained. The passengers would struggle to full awakening. But for the moment, all of them except himself were like dead people. Time, itself, had been suspended.

Canfield suddenly shivered. His heartbeat raced. His alarmed adrenals flooded new courage to his fear charged arteries. Something alive and conscious was in the plane with him!

But *what?* He did not know. In the timeless atmosphere of the ship, his mind had reached into the telepathic void below the sub-atomic levels and had detected some invisible malign influence present. It had recoiled, shocked, in frank unadulterated horror!

Some bodiless creature, some foul entity of utterly loathsomeness, was squatting beside him . . . *watching.* And somehow he knew it was the same creature that had hovered unseen at his bedside that last chilling night in Strip Town. The creature who seemingly could juggle time-intervals and dimensional spaces at will! Gorken!

Canfield's whole body was suddenly racked in an uncontrollable shudder. Was he always to be tortured this way, to writhe helplessly while his merciless enemy studied him like he were a bug it was preparing to squash.

If Gorken suspected, why didn't the monster act? Why didn't he end this meaningless cat-and mouse game with direct violence? What held him back - - - unless . . . unless it was the fact that he was still uncertain of Oliver Brown, still had no genuine evidence of betrayal and treason to the cause?

Canfield grasped at the ray of hope his rational brain held out to him. At least, it was better than nothing, he thought.

The acceleration of the rocket plane lessened. The folds of the pressure seats relaxed their grip. Gradually, the passengers recovered their senses, Ann among them.

Ann lifted her arms, rubbed at her cheeks to restore the blood to her face. Then, she glanced at the tiny jeweled chronometer on her supple wrist. She turned and smiled at Canfield, half-sheepish, half-perplexed.

"You sure this isn't the wrong rocket - - - that we aren't going to Bombay instead of Miami?" She tapped the dial with one slim finger. "Either we stayed in high G twice as long as usual - - - or my young recuperative powers aren't what they used to be. Maybe we'd better get buro-mated right away or soon I won't be much use to you - - - "

"I'd like nothing better," said Canfield. "Want to name it?"

He watched her carefully for reaction. There was none.

So he'd overplayed it. He rushed in quickly to fill the conversational vacuum he'd created.

"You're right, however," he said. "The rocket was in a high-gravity state for some time. Even when I snapped out of it, the weight was still pushing me - - - - "

"I knew it," said Ann Luzanne, determmedly. "That's just what comes of letting ourselves in for a bunch of matriarch bosses." She glanced anxiously around. "No scanners on us, I hope?"

"No."

"That's a relief. We girls ought to shed these heavy duties we've taken on. We ought to get busy and breed more boy-babies. Then, everything mechanical wouldn't keep going to pot like it has been doing. Obviously, some female mech primed the tubes with the wrong gradient fuel - - - I'll bet ten to one, you'd find she was some mate-starved filly who was daydreaming of

the day she gets her biscuspids filled - - - if ever."

"They can't hand out diamonds to all the girls," said Canfield. He gazed out of the window a moment. "So now we roller-coaster from here to Miami - - - to make up for the overcharge on the fuel." He turned and grinned. "Well, one consolation, Ann - - - the matriarchs won't last too much longer. I hope."

"We all hope," said Ann. She turned her head slightly past him and stared also at the black strato-sky outside.

Canfield's glance then roved over her profiled features, delving for any meaning that her expression might add to her spoken words. He drew a blank. Again, he wondered how much she had known about Oliver Brown's secret connections. Perhaps more than he had allowed himself to suspect. It was quite apparent that she shared the League's ambition that the matriarchy meet its downfall - - - whatever that meant.

At that moment, the rocket hostess emerged from the pilot's compartment. She announced that astrogation deviations had caused the plane to go slightly astray. A new course was being plotted. The strato-vessel would be no more than five minutes late in landing.

James Canfield and Ann Luzanne exchanged amused smiles, and Canfield's line of thought got abruptly ended.

AS SOON as the rocket set down at the Miami spacedrome, Canfield hailed a cold-jet surface cab. The taxi whisked him and Ann down the great Tamiami Freeway, across the new Pepper Causeway and into the crowded sky-piercing playsphere of Miami Beach. The pleasure town ranked as the most heavily populated area its size in the twenty-first century world - - - outside of Roerabaja on the opposite side of the globe.

Twilight had already arrived, darkening Biscayne Bay.

But elsewhere, the sun was not missed. A volcanic eruption of light spread out from the alabaster-like city to illuminate the trafficways, beltwalks and ocean beaches with a glare that equalled daylight.

Along the shore, the Atlantic rolled into the white sands in gentle swells, blue as if some ship had just sunk in it with ten thousand tons of azure paint spilling from its holds. Yet far on the horizon, the darkness maintained an indispellable vigil, a half-circle of gloom that reminded how small the nuclear-powered campfires of men still were compared with the vastness of unconquered nature.

Canfield and Ann checked in at the Hotel Shelley on the beach front. They took adjoining suites.

As soon as they were settled and Ann had repaired to dress, Canfield put in a visicall to his South American customers who were registered in the same hostelry. The connection was made in seconds. Colors swirled on the visiplate, then coalesced to reconstruct the images of two medium-built dark-haired men, distinguished from each other only by the fact that one had a trim black mustache.

Both men reminded Canfield vaguely of Juano Picozzi. Behind them, he could make the shimmering wavery details of a tastefully-decorated apartment suite similar to his own.

The two men introduced themselves. Ruy Vivar. Diego McAndrews.

It was immediately evident to Canfield that neither was previously acquainted with Brown. Following a mutual exchange of compliments, the three agreed to hold off any further business discussions until all of them had dined together later in the evening.

Canfield, as host, named one of the more prominent night clubs of the playsphere. The place he cited proved agreeable at once to both his guests. He terminated the call.

After he had changed attire, Canfield

contacted the bar and ordered drinks sent up. The tension he had felt in the rocket plane was now dissipated. He had reestablished rapport with his environment. Here in the midst of companionship and human life, nothing would be apt to disturb him. He felt secure in the role of Oliver Brown.

A cautious knock sounded at the door from the adjoining suite. It was followed by Ann Luzanne's entrance.

She walked into the room, chin erect, proud, confident and a dream. A new Ann, who anxiously awaited his approval. She had exchanged her travel clothes for a gown of radiant skylon, green as polished emerald. It set off the cream ivory of her slim arms and shoulders. Her bright scarlet hair, upswept and lacquered, was held by combs studded with tiny green phosphorescent stones that glowed and sparkled. Her wrap was a shining glossy affair of plastic chinchilla.

Dancing lights appeared in her eyes. She moved toward Canfield, whirled once, and said, "Like?"

"Very much."

"Surprised?"

"Should I be?" he asked, cautiously.

"I've never opened up this side of me before," she said. "Kind of a shield we girls wear, I guess. But somehow tonight, I wanted to. Always before, Oliver, I feel like I've been too business-like with you . . . "

"You?"

" . . . mainly because I wanted to make good and because I thought you wanted your girls that way. But recently - - - well, you've been a warmer person yourself. More human. More like somebody born in this day and age. You did have a strange outlook - - - "

"I did?"

"On some things." She smiled. "But why drag up the past? All I mean is I like you so much better this way. I really do."

An interruption came at that moment. Someone was in the corridor, ringing for admission. Canfield frowned, released the guard on the electronic door. The beam-operated panel slid open and a box-shaped robot came in with the drinks Canfield had ordered.

Ann smiled at him, expressing her pleasure at his thoughtfulness. But the mood of the interlude between them was destroyed. Canfield strode over, tuned the visiscreen to an entertainment channel. Then they sat together and watched an underwater swimming ballet until time came for them to go meet their South American guests.

The ballet was spectacular and lovely. The show girls - - - previously prepared for the submersion by injections of oxygen tablets - - - were able to perform their intricate aquatic maneuvers for as long as ten minutes without surfacing. The result was a graceful and breathtaking exhibition of mermaids in motion.

At twenty-one thirty, Canfield and Ann descended to the lobby. They met Vivar and McAndrews and aero-taxied with them to the Club Canopus.

Located on the mainland to the south, the Canopus was housed in a great transparent dome, much like an inverted fishbowl over which the stars formed a natural canopy. On entering the cabaret, Canfield and his party were shown immediately to a ringside table. Hardly had their dinner orders been taken, however, when the floor show began - - - a three-ring circus of aerial acts who performed in ultra-violet light on trapezes high in the air, just under the dome. To ease the strain on the spectators below, all seats reclined back at an angle. No one had to arch his neck unnecessarily.

"For centuries, you *norteamericanos* have insisted on doing things on the most gigantic scale possible, Senor Brown," said Diego McAndrews, appreciatively. "And how it fills the eye! Everywhere I turn, I witness sights that

make the resources of my own small country look meager, indeed."

"Nonsense," returned Canfield. "I happen to have seen some of your bullfights - - "

"True. The corridas are exciting, but - - - "

"It takes Yankees to provide the bulls, is that it?" said Canfield, laughing.

"You have the monopoly on tetraploids," McAndrews pointed out.

"But not the sense of drama, the appreciation of ritual that makes your own sport so world-renowned." Canfield paused, turned to Ann. Another of his buried memories had suddenly come to the fore, giving him the opportunity to recall more of Brown's past life for the benefit of his audience. "Do you remember, Ann, the contest we saw in Lima last year?"

Ann's features paled, as if she were recalling an unpleasant memory. "Of course I do, Oliver."

Canfield discerned immediately that she had not liked the experience. His predecessor had probably forced it on her to chasten her mind or shock her emotions into female submissiveness. Damn Oliver Brown, he thought! What a fantastic amount of psychological damage the damned idiot had managed to work on other people's lives during his unnaturally-extended career!

There seemed to be no way out of the *faux pas* he'd blundered himself into, except to muddle out.

But suddenly, Diego McAndrews picked up the ball. The South American turned to Ann: "You did not find it exhilirating then, senorita - - - to see the matador dominate an infuriated six thousand pound bull, twice the height of a man? It did not thrill you, Senorita Luzanne, to see so magnificent a creature so ably dispatched?"

"Not when the toreador's a ten-foot robot, himself," Ann returned.

"Ah, but that is to save the life - - - "

"Whose life? That of a mechanical killer? Something equipped with a brain that can think faster than a man's? Tetraploid bull or not, I don't see how even a dinosaur could stand up against a ruthless killing machine. At least in the old days - - - the way you *caballeros* used to stage it - - - it mattered whether or not the toreador, himself, was killed. But now," said Ann, "It is only the giant bull that is in danger!"

"We are a civilized age," Diego McAndrews replied, shrugging. "Human life is valuable. We are no longer Romans to cry that it rain blood."

"Agreed," said Ann. "But just the same - - - "

She continued her argument, but James Canfield no longer heard a word of it, himself - - - although McAndrews and Vivar continued to make an attentive audience.

Canfield's attention had suddenly been diverted. As if swept by a powerful magnet, it was drawn away from the table - - - and now it focused upon a group of diners who had just arrived. They sat not more than ten or twelve feet away from him.

The party comprised four persons. Three were tanned and faultlessly-groomed young men. The fourth person - - - and she was obviously the mutual object of all their attentions - - - was a voluptuous girl in midnight blue skylon. She was the one who had first attracted Canfield's gaze, though her back was turned and he saw only a pleasing mass of golden yellow hair.

But now she slowly turned around, first revealing a smooth pale cheek, then the clear outlines of a profile almost classic in beauty. So familiar, too, that Canfield almost stopped breathing for a moment. Then - - - finally - - - the girl's entire slim aristocratic face came into full view, a face of extraordinary loveliness.

Canfield's heart skipped a series of beats.

Marilyn!

He felt himself assailed by confusion. The blood rushed to his temples, warm and throbbing - - - while by contrast, the roof of his mouth felt dry. Marilyn, here in Miami!

He glanced swiftly at the others at his own table. None had noticed his distraction.

Thanking his gods, he turned again to study - - - discreetly if he could - - - this beautiful wanton girl a few feet away who had been his buro-mate for less than a year. And again, he wondered what she had ever seen in him. What had he been? Merely a man of science, moderately wealthy but not possessed of any physical attraction or any great personal magnetism, either. A man who had been on the last downward slope of life - - - seventy-three years old!

Now, Canfield studied the men who were with Marilyn. He wondered which one was the moon pilot she had eloped with. Or was that brief romance of hers dead now? He recalled the Ones had said her life pattern would be aberrated, changed - - - because of the changes they had rung in on Canfield's own life.

Suddenly, Marilyn's voice - - - liquid, charged with amusement - - - carried to him: "Why, Dormouse, what a clever ending!" Canfield winced before he realized she had addressed one of her own party with the old name of intimacy she had used with him. Simultaneously, he saw Marilyn's slim fingers graze and caress the cheek of one of the young men.

In the next moment, Canfield felt Ann's own warm hand creep into his palm. Her voice said at his ears, "She's beautiful, I'll grant you, darling - - - but sort of predatory-looking. Do you know her?"

"No," said Canfield.

"Most unfortunate," spoke up Ruy Vivar, at his left. "I had almost begun to count on you for an introduction, senor." He sighed and drained his glass of Riesling. It was his sole remark of the evening.

THE HOURS rolled by: twenty three hundred, midnight, oh one hundred, oh two hundred.

For Canfield and his guests, the only change in atmosphere was that the Floridians about them now seemed more bent on exercising their legs than their gullets. The polished floor which rotated under the crowds was jam-packed with dancers. Their brilliant costumes created a kaleidoscope of color that told how personal tastes in fashions will diverge from the norm whenever a race is freed from style regimentation. Given free rein, the people of the era tended to wear what they pleased - - though Canfield was relieved to note that "bikinism" was not as popular here as it had been in Strip Town.

Finally, the South Americans agreed to make a deal. Contract papers, cementing the accord, could await signing until the morrow however, both sides decided. The first shipment southward would include five thousand head of second-generation triploids, and one thousand dressed carcasses of tetraploids. All beef cattle - - - naturally.

The quartet returned to the Shelley together, firm friends. But Canfield and Ann had to beg off from Diego McAndrews' insistence on a couple of last "dawn-caps" in the adjoining bar. The latter's capacity seemed limitless.

Four hours later, Canfield rose again. He dressed casually and dropped down to the deserted lobby. Moving on, to the beach, he found it almost equally unoccupied. He rented a cabana, changed to swim attire, and emerged to run at top-speed across the tide-wet sand. He plunged into the rippling ocean and swam with blinding tireless strokes beyond the breakwater.

Upon reaching the open sea, he swam a full mile toward the horizon before

he sighted shark fins a few hundred feet to his right. Caution warned him to return to the beach.

When he finally came out of the water, he felt no signs of fatigue other than a slight increase in respiration. The rippling brown skin of his body rapidly dried in the morning sun

After he had changed again to street clothes, Canfield breakfasted. Then, he took off on a rapid belt-walk tour of the city. Faint strains of music bubbled companionately from his collar-band receiver.

He couldn't have told exactly what he was looking for; certainly, it wasn't adventure. And he knew that Marilyn - - - if her habits had not changed - - - would remain asleep for many more hours, so there was no chance that he could run into her.

Nevertheless, an urgent restlessness prodded him onward. The same disturbed state would not permit him to return to the thankless solitude of the hotel suite to await Ann's awakening.

At Fifth, Canfield changed directions, hopping upon a mobile walk that ran along Collins - - - past luxury shops.

Suddenly, his sharpened instincts told him he was being followed. He glanced swiftly behind him. No other pedestrian was in sight for blocks. The whole city seemed strangely still.

He halted, debating whether to continue his stroll or return to the hotel. Finally, he decided he had been needlessly alarmed by some trick of his own senses.

He wheeled a second time, faced his original direction and stepped forward - - - completely out of space!

Out of space and - - -

- - - into a room!

Nausea made him reel. It was a room almost devoid of furniture. Four square bleak walls, a fastened window and a door that was seam-fitted to virtual invisibility.

But it had an occupant. Dr. Juano Picozzi sat on a wire chair in one corner. He watched with folded hands. He wore a white collarless shirt and white belted breeks, as if he had just returned from an early-morning game of trampolin tennis.

Canfield's dizziness subsided. The room tended to blur, but became solid again a moment later when his hands clasped upon something cold and metallic to the touch. His eyes traveled down the length of his arm. They made out the cylindrical form of a cheap brass bed rail. His fingers were clutching the tubular metal, as if life, itself, depended on his holding tight.

"I told you we would soon meet again," said Picozzi. "I'm sorry it had to be this way. But it was important I keep the secret of this hiding-place from being registered on your mind."

"So you decided to jerk me through the nine hundred and ninety-ninth dimension," Canfield accused, angrily.

"No, senor. Merely through dimensions one to four."

"Then, how - - - ?"

"How did you get here? We met on the street and rode to this place. By a devious route, of course - - - but come, do the details matter?"

Canfield relaxed slightly. He grinned, rubbed his chin. "I was just beginning to give up on you," he said. "Thought you'd never show up."

"I've been busy," said Picozzi. His eyes shone. "Tell me, have you enjoyed leading the life of a multi-millionaire. Or, do you think it would ultimately drive you to a life of asceticism?"

"No, not asceticism," said Canfield, thinking of the warm appealing loveliness of Ann Luzanne's body. "Something simpler perhaps, sometime."

"Indeed? Like?"

"Oh, a double life - - - half action, half contemplation. An opportunity to pile up my own empire, instead of bossing the board of directors of somebody else's private kingdom."

"Sounds like a nice dream," said Picozzi. "Ah, to have only been born normal!" He fingered a small translucent crystal, that appeared to have been brilliantly cut from contra-magnetic titanite or some other similar gem sphere. "The world is so full of a number of things," he mused, thoughtfully. The crystal suddenly glowed with piercing pin-point light.

"If you brought me here, what happened to my memory?" Canfield demanded.

"Suppressed."

"That's nice to know"

"Rather, not allowed to develop any impression," Picozzi elucidated. "I short-circuited your senses. What your eyes perceived as we came here never got to your memory cells where it could be recorded. Clear?"

"Clear. I'm an etherized homing pigeon. Now then, you might be interested in what I've got to say. Gorken's summoned me for a meeting"

"I know," returned Picozzi. "The Denver session - - - six days from now. That's why I arranged this get-together, Jaime."

"To brief me?"

"*Amigo mio,* how you will need it."

"Conceded," said Canfield. "Let's go."

Picozzi laughed. "I've already stocked in your brain all the information you'll need. I am now to give you the weapon that will destroy Gorken."

"Weapon? What weapon?"

"The ultimate instrument of destruction."

"Fine. Bring it out."

Picozzi shook his head. "It will be hidden inside your mind. There, it will stay buried until the moment you meet Gorken face to face. Then and only then, will you come to know what it is - - - and how it may be used."

Canfield whistled.

"I can take no chances as you see," said Picozzi. "The weapon must not be prematurely brought into play."

"You're making quite a storehouse out of my brain," Canfield replied, sardonically. "I'm getting so I feel like a stranger every time I poke through the corners of my own mind."

Picozzi shrugged. "It's the only way."

"I presume so," said Canfield. "Who taught you the trick? The Ones?"

The psychiatrist smiled. "Part of it - - - and part of it I filched from the League. Your friends, Flug and Skink, had often used the same strategem to keep the location of the clinic hidden. *Blot-out,* they call it."

"So that's why I walked through a wall - - - and landed plop in the middle of Los Angeles!"

"Exactly. Right now, *amigo,* you could be looking directly at the clinic building - - - and your brain would refuse to see it. You could touch it on the outside and your senses would lie, would tell you that you were touching empty space. Now then, how have things been going?"

"Fine," said Canfield. "Oh, fine." He made no effort to conceal the sarcasm. "The day I landed on Brown's headquarters, my limousine-plane damned near killed me. Blew sky-high, taking the pilot along." Canfield filled in the details for Picozzi, then went on: "Spacing down here on the rocket plane, I had the feeling of being watched while we were still soaring through high-G. Then at the Club Canopus yesterday, who should pop up but Marilyn - - - "

"Here in Miami?"

Canfield nodded. "I guess she didn't honeymoon on Luna, after all. Maybe she's repented. Maybe she's begun looking now for a certain missing James Canfield. Come to think of it, however, she didn't seem particularly worried last night - - - or lonely, either - - - "

"I'll contact the Ones about this as soon as I get back to Los Angeles," Picozzi promised. "They may have charted out new casual patterns for her. There is one time line I'm sure of,

however - - - your little surprise party at Jackson Space Station was arranged by matriarch intelligence."

"What!"

"The government's been watching Brown for some time, the Ones inform me. Finally, they decided a trial assassination - - - so when you ordered new servants, they planted Farsun in your household as their operative. The plot failed, poor Yudkin got blown up - - - "

"But why? Why do the matriarchs suspect Brown?"

"The influence of the League has become strong enough to be felt. Even, the government itself is infiltrated. Still, the intelligence corps has been unable to get a lead on whether the League even exists or not. Therefore, some burocrat decided to stir things up by direct attack. However - - - " Picozzi smiled " - - - you've allayed their suspicion in recent weeks by your changed actions. It may be that your life is safe for awhile."

"Fine. I act like Brown, the government kills me. I act like me, Gorken kills me."

"Want to back out?"

"No, thanks. But I can't say it won't be exciting," said Canfield, drily. He switched subjects. "So Farson is a traitor. That's pleasant to know."

"A traitor to you, a patriot to his country," Picozzi replied His eyebrows arched. "I'll leave it to a Korzybskyite to untangle that semantic mess."

"What do I do about him?"

"Let him be for the moment."

"All right."

"If you get Gorken, the League will panic. Its hysterical members will give the matriarchs enough trouble to take the heat off Oliver Brown. Anyhow, the Ones figure a democratic government should step in within five years, if we can provide a catalyst to the mixture that's already been brewing."

"Seems to me we're juggling a lot of future history," said Canfield. "Doesn't that worry the Ones?"

"By the twenty-fourth century, Jamie, personal extinction has come to be almost pleasurable," said Picozzi. "They figure, what have they got to lose?"

"Enviable state. Tell me, Juano, what if a seam starts coming apart somewhere else in this conspiracy? How do I get hold of you? These casual meetings may suit you - - - but they don't do anything great for my peace of mind."

For answer, Picozzi handed Canfield a force-field nullifier. "This," he said, "will get you past the barrier of my hideout in California. If something urgent develops, go there and wait for me - - - but only if it's so urgent, you find you can't handle it with the information I've already planted on you."

Canfield accepted the pocket-sized metallic disk. "Thanks," he said. "I feel better now."

"Excellent." Picozzi arose from the wire chair. "I'll spirit you back to Miami Beach."

He walked to the wall, pressed a button that released the almost invisible door. "If you'll kindly step ahead of me - - - "

CANFIELD suddenly found himself moving south on the beltwalk that paralleled Alton Road. He glanced toward the sky. The sun stood at high noon over Biscayne Bay to his right. Somehow, he had lost four hours.

He leaped off the belt as the first taxi platform came by and whistled down a surface vehicle. The cab slowed enough for him to hop in and he promptly told the driver to rush him to the Shelley.

As the sturdy jet-car pulled away from the mobile curb, Canfield glimpsed a halfway-familiar figure hidden inside the doorway of a plastobrick-front restaurant just across the intersecting avenue. The figure was skirted - - - and thus, most probably female. It shrank

back further into the protecting archway, but not in time to prevent Canfield from registering its general outline. The image that his brain recorded again struck a familiar chord in Canfield's memory, but the full tone was blurred and no matching eidetic response developed.

Annoyed and angered, he beat at his temples vigorously with spread fingertips.

What was he, a living man or a mindless, remote-controlled automaton? These psych blocks in his head were on the increase. Day by day, his personal memories as James Canfield were losing their sharp outline, becoming sketchy and uncertain.

For what justifiable reason? What did Picozzi and the Ones hope to gain by suppressing half a man's world into his subconscious? Damn it, he wished they'd never disturbed his routine, had let him alone, had allowed him to live out his life in peace - - - torn-up as it had been.

Suddenly, his misery geared Canfield into new action. Both as Oliver Brown and as Canfield, he was well acquainted with Miami Beach. "Never mind the Shelley," he barked at the driver. "Take me to the Medical Arts Center."

THE EXAMINING psychologist picked up the thin metal sheets punched with elaborate symbols, as quickly as the robot analyzer turned them, and studied each one thoroughly. Finally, he laid aside the completed charts. He turned to Canfield. "You're ninety-nine point three per cent sane, Mr. Brown. That's what you desired to find out, wasn't it?"

"Far from it," said Canfield. "I wanted to discover if my mind's been tampered with."

"Indeed - - - ?"

" - - - I've got a feeling I'm under hypnotic influence right now. If so, I expect you to uncover it, erase it. I'll pay whatever it costs. Just get me free, that's all. Null-free."

"Ninety-nine point three's a pretty good mark," the psychologist replied, soothingly. "That national average is only eighty four point six - - - though you've got to bear in mind that even that's due to the disbalance of sexes."

"Why is that?"

"Women, as a whole, are a great deal more sane than men. Which is why you find so few geniuses among them."

"You're evading the issue," snapped Canfield. "I know I'm sane."

"Congratulations, then. It would appear you didn't really need our help at all."

"I insist you tell me what you found in my mind. Who's controlling me?" Canfield pushed his chin forward. "I know you discovered something - - - your eyelid flickered, an artery throbbed for a moment in your temple, your respiration lost three seconds. All when you scanned those punched sheets."

"You'd make a highly skilled observer, yourself, Mr. Brown," the examiner commented. "Ever consider psych integration work - - - or matriarch intelligence?"

"Let's get to the point," said Canfield. "You found something. What was it?"

"All right," the psychologist responded, wearily. "I promised you a report - - - and here it is. The seven-tenths of a point by which you failed to achieve a score of ideal sanity is due to a number of small aberrations, centering around a slight disbelief in your own identity."

"Aberrations? What sort?"

"Chiefly, I find you are haunted by the obsession that you have been mentally enslaved. Once you rid yourself of this odd hallucination, I believe I can almost guarantee a ninety nine point nine - - - "

"Nuts!" said Canfield. "I'm a little grown-up to go merry-go-round riding"

He turned on his heel and strode angrily out of the office. Ten seconds later, he was back on the street, hailing another surface cab to take him back to the hotel.

Nothing had been solved.

Nothing.

SIX DAYS LATER, James Canfield entrained by monorail for Denver.

The period following his return from Florida had been one of undiluted gray: twenty-hour working days and nerveless self-imposed discipline comprised his routine.

For even Ann Luzanne, he had too little time - - - though if his associate supposed him troubled and distant, she gave no outward evidence she was disturbed by the knowledge.

With the greater problem of dealing with Gorken now facing him, however, Canfield gradually found himself losing the warm empathetic contact he had managed to build up with the girl who was his fiancee - - - and the helplessness he felt spurred him into further blind fury at his situation. His four-hour sleeping periods were made possible only by sheer effort of will

He called Ann into conference the same day they rocketed back to Jackson Space Station and told her he had learned that Farson was in the pay of the matriarchs. She looked completely astonished - - - so much so, that he remembered she had hired the major-domo herself.

But did that mean anything? After all, she had also hired Yudkin - - - and Yudkin was dead.

"What do you intend to do about Farson?" Ann asked him.

"Let him hang around."

"But if he's spying - - - ?"

Canfield watched her closely. "What's there for him to learn? I'm a business man. The books of the corporation are open. Anytime the government wants to, it can come in and gloat over them."

"Of course," said Ann.

She turned away then, and the subject did not come up between them anymore.

Now, the monorail train was splitting the high surface atmosphere along the outskirts of Denver. Its streamlined shape was a blur as it sped past Strasburg, Bennett, and the other outlying communities. But at Watkins, where the gleaming suburbs commenced to spread across the land, the train began to slow

Presently, the shining plasto-dome of the monorail terminal came into view. The train slid into the station, braked to a halt between two hulking mono-engines designed for the big haul over the Rockies.

Canfield got out, made his way by float-escalator to the street. A copter cab suddenly swung out of traffic, edged in to the curb in front of him.

The pilot, dull-eyed, blank of expression, addressed Canfield in Draconian. He made use of a four-syllable phrase that translated itself into a whole command in English: "Will you kindly get in, Mr. Brown? The League is waiting."

The man was a *control*, Canfield told himself after he had studied the former's reactions a moment. Probably, he'd been seized, briefed hypnotically, and then turned loose for this one mission. After the man had dropped his passenger at the meeting place, he would fly aloft, recover his memory, look around him dazedly, and wonder what in the world had happened to the last three hours out of his life.

And I'll know just exactly how he'll feel, Canfield added grimly. He got in and the copter cab soared aloft, mounting to a thousand feet above the surface by the time it passed over the Civic Center and even higher at it soared by the square-mile area of the Nuclear Energy Barracks.

Heading south, the taxi did not com-

mence its fluttering descent until it was well past Englewood.

Upon touching ground near a rotund building of neo-glass, Canfield leaped out and waved off the pilot. The copter promptly shot upward and away.

Canfield grinned slightly, thinking that practically proved his judgment. He gave his attention to his new surroundings. This was the spot where one of them would blow himself up, he thought - - - Gorken or Canfield. If it turned out to be Canfield in the end, well - - - he'd have had the consolation of knowing he tried, not to mention a taste of such adventure as he had supposed was dead in the northern prosaic world.

Ahead of him, an immobile walk, laid with blue-mottled flagstones that looked like they might have been imported from the moon, led directly to the squat round building. Other than to follow the path, there was no place to go. So Canfield strode in that direction.

As he approached the translucent wall of the odd structure, a beam-operated door slid open for him. He stepped boldly inside.

A robot immediately appeared in attendance. As a rule, any automaton within its own class resembled any other automaton to a degree that made personal identification impossible without serial numbers or positronic probes. But as Canfield eyed the short mechanical creature in the room with him, he decided it was the same one which had demanded his pass in the corridors of the League clinic. Automatically, he produced the card.

"Mr. Brown, you must hurry," the robot said. "You are the last one to arrive." He held out a shapeless mass of black cloth. "Your robes."

Canfield's false memory followed through, told him what to do. He accepted the uniform and pulled it over his head. Then, he fumbled around until he found the switch that caused the folds to swell and gird his body.

Although the outer surface of the cloth was black to the eye, the inner surface showed no color whatsoever to the view of the wearer. To Canfield himself, peering through the cloth, the uniform was virtually transparent. Yet, he saw it served its purpose - - - to preserve his identity from others who might be present at the council.

A second door slid aside in the left wall of the room. Canfield entered the passageway thus revealed. It led to a ramp that curled and slanted downward. At the bottom, he discovered a third door. He paused before it and rapped four times, allowing a short pause between the third and fourth blows. A second later, the door opened and he was admitted into the council chamber of the League.

Taking the only empty seat at a long rectangular table, Canfield glanced rapidly around the room.

He counted twenty persons present in the room. All except two were garbed in concealing robes. Undisguised were Flug and Skink. Both Leaguemen wore drab green uniforms almost military in cut. They sat close to the head of the table, flanking a black-robed man - - - taller and bulkier by half than any of the others present - - - who, himself, sprawled loosely on a throne-like chair.

Canfield wondered, was this Gorken?

At that moment, a voice commenced speaking in Draconian - - - a voice that apparently emanated from the robed figure. It was a hollow voice, chill as the shadowed peaks of Luna or the depths of outer space. Yet, it spoke rapidly, methodically, outlining in lucid terms the new steps the League proposed to take.

Each man would receive his individual directives by private communication, the voice said. But the overall plan would call especially for the following measures:

(1) Suppression of male births to a level fifty percent below normal was to continue for another twenty years. Immigration of males was hurting the present proportion.

(2) The three members of the League who were foreign heads of state were, each, to continue applying political pressure to America. But under no circumstances, were they to allow a war to develop.

(3) The two members who controlled propaganda sources were to begin preparing a campaign stumping for the establishment of government by a male oligarchy

(4) The five members of the League who were connected with the present government were to start undermining confidence in the matriarchs' intelligence corps

(5) The two religious leaders present were to continue preaching a jeremiad against the mutant segment of the population. In the unknown powers of the mutants resided one of the greatest dangers to the League.

The voice halted for a moment, then added a postscript to its remarks: Due to a leak, the location of the rejuvenation clinic had been accidentally revealed to persons outside the organization. Therefore, the clinic had again been moved. Members coming up for operations would be informed later what city they should report to.

As the import of what they heard soaked into their minds, the assembled League members began discussing the proposed measures.

They kept the ball rolling in an orderly manner. Each member had his short say, then yielded to his neighbor on the left.

Flug and Skink made no comments whatsoever, but the tall robed figure followed each League member's remarks with a succinct slashing opinion, loaded with relentless logic. Curious, Canfield timed the replies. Each began exactly three seconds after a council member had stated his views.

The rest of the meeting proved disappointingly brief - - - as far as Canfield personally was concerned. He had hoped to learn more about the League's operations; or at least, the identity of more of the members. Uncovering nothing, he realized he would have to rely on the Ones' assurance that the death of Gorken would cause the organization to break up.

At last, however, the members got up from their chairs and began to file out.

Canfield deliberately lingered until the end, hoping for an opportunity to get alone with Gorken. But as the room emptied, the moronic-faced Skink stayed firmly rooted to his position. The big meaty man stared fixedly at Canfield, as though his beady eyes could pierce through the fabric of his cloaked disguise.

This wouldn't do, thought Canfield. He'd have to devise a better stratagem. He joined the end of the procession and followed the single file of men out the chamber door.

The exit was the same by which he had entered the room. Yet when he stepped outside, he discovered that the upward-spiraling ramp that the chamber should have opened on had disappeared. Instead, Canfield found himself staring down a long level corridor, somewhat similar to the corridors of the clinic. Far ahead, he glimpsed the form of the last member except himself to leave the council room. The latter's robed figure was just vanishing around a corner. Canfield decided to wait a moment or two longer just where he was.

At that moment, Skink, himself, came out of the chamber. The big man's mouth dropped, slack-jawed, at sight of Canfield. Then his body slouched toward him, his eyes wrinkled with question marks, his hands twitching loosely at his side as if they fought the desire

to rip Canfield's protective robe from him.

Skink said: "Something you wanted to talk about?"

The sentence barely got finished. Canfield's mind had suddenly begun functioning with the speed and clarity of a man facing execution

He acted with pantherish quickness. The steel-spring muscles of his thighs tensed, then released - - - hurling him forward with the velocity of a bullet.

Skink fell back under the fury of Canfield's attack. His brows knit in perplexity that swiftly changed to enragedness. The first assault floored him, but he promptly sprang up again, surprisingly lithe for all his sluggish appearance.

Canfield stepped inside, brought his fist crashing against the big man's puffy features. A second chopping blow shuddered into Skink's temple, followed by a vicious hook. The League follower dropped like a felled ox.

Time had grown short - - - with only seconds in the balance. Canfield leaped over his unconscious adversary, pushed his shoulders against the council chamber of the door. It gave. He rushed in, scanned the rotund room in a single glance. The figure of Gorken had not stirred.

Exultation filled him. His moment of triumph was at hand. Picozzi had promised that the weapon would materialize into his hands the moment he faced the Master of the League. The knowledge of his strength flooded Canfield with confidence. He skirted the rectangular table and came up behind the sprawled figure. There he halted, prepared to strike his death-blow. Gorken was probably going back into his out-of-phase condition, he thought; that would account for the monster's stilled attitude.

He waited. The seconds passed, agonizing him in their lapse. Where was the weapon, his brain screamed? Nothing was happening - - - *nothing at all!*

More time dragged by. Why didn't the secret of the weapon's location emerge from the buried cells of his mind. A peculiar panic tingled Canfield's body; his skin crawled in anticipation of death. *The trap had reversed itself!*

Then he recalled that the Ones had said he should meet Gorken face to face. He put his hands forward, reached for the robe shrouding the sprawled figure. He pulled - - - and the fabric came apart in his hands.

Suddenly he froze - - - paralyzed for precious seconds into inaction. His dazed eyes made out a bulky thing of burnished metal that in no manner resembled a human being. Scanning discs rotated in a blank silver-sheened face that stared at him - - - and past him. The robot was deenergized, mindless; it had already performed its duty as a listener and proxy at the council meeting.

Canfield, now slightly recovered, recognized the type. The automaton was an adaptation of the husky osmium-shielded robots that staffed the nuclear factories. He had been tricked. This was not Gorken. Gorken had not been present at the gathering, at all.

For a seemingly timeless interval, Canfield stood in the room - - - unable to function, unable to plan. Although a chronometer might have measured it as only a few seconds, it seemed an eternity that his body trembled, fighting the desire of his mind to retreat into womblike schizophrenia.

FINALLY, Canfield managed to reestablish cortical control over his body. His reflexes approached normal. He felt in his pocket for the Scorpion, brought out the gun and palmed it in his right hand. The folds of his robe almost completely concealed it from view.

Next, he opened the door and listened cautiously for sounds in the corridor.

There were none. He stepped out - - -

And discovered that the corridor had vanished, replaced once more by the ascending ramp. Skink's fallen body was nowhere in sight.

What was the answer to this riddle? Canfield suspected that the council room was built in a shaft that enabled it to oscillate between several underground levels of the rotund building at once. Possibly however, a more complex reason existed - - - one that involved the same dislocation of spatial coordinates. Even, possibly, tesseractal compression.

He started up the ramp, expecting it to end in a door that would admit him to the building's small outer reception room.

Instead, the ramp suddenly brought him to a neo-glassed balcony which appeared to completely circle the outer ramparts of the structure.

Canfield's senses were growing increasingly jarred at their inability to get orientated. There seemed to be literally no way to break out of the building - - - and time was running out on him. Soon now, someone would stumble upon Skink - - - or the attendant would gain his consciousness and raise an alarm.

Suddenly, a familiar scent assailed his nostrils. A perfume that evoked sensuous memories.

He flattened his body against the inner wall, while his disturbed memory sought to identify the elusive aroma. Simultaneously, a voice penetrated to his ears, filtering through a louvred window just a few feet ahead of him in the curved plasto-concrete.

He began shivering - - - for the voice was Marilyn's and she was speaking to Flug in Draconian. Speaking and being answered, though the tone was so low even Canfield's heightened auditory apparatus could not separate the bunched syllables into meaningful sounds.

Now, Canfield understood with horror who it was that had brushed past him that first night in the Radium Cabana and uttered a warning in Gorken's own tongue. Not Ann Luzanne as he had subconsciously suspected ever since (and never admitted to himself), but Marilyn, herself - - - acting on some mysterious instruction from the head of the League.

But the nostalgic effect of the perfume, how account for that?

He pondered a second or so and came up with the answer. When he was rejuvenated, the buried engrams in his various sense organs had also been given renewed life. The scent of the perfume was the same one which had originally attracted him to Marilyn.

Now he realized that when he first met Marilyn, he had unconsciously retained a longing for that same indefinable essence because of the first girl who wore it - - - the girl he had loved long ago, the girl who had died of the Asiatic Plague.

And so he had fallen in love - - - or pseudo-love - - - a second time. Canfield relaxed, let out his breath in relief. The power Marilyn had once possessed over him was explained - - - though that of course, he reflected, did nothing to relieve him from his present predicament.

More also was explained: Marilyn's pleasure excursions to Miami Beach, Bar Harbor, St. Jovite, for example. On thinking it over, weren't they more probably alibies for missions she had carried out for Gorken? Damn Picozzi! What had he gotten him into? Complications at every step, unpredictable peril at every turn - - - all for the sake of youth that might vanish in a month. Marilyn, this changed and dangerous Marilyn, could so easily be the one misstep that now brought him to the brink of disaster . . .

Canfield's heart suddenly pounded. Knowledge came to him like the clap of thunder. There was no other solution,

no other course he could follow now, except - - -

Did he dare admit it to himself? He'd have to, he told himself - - - the future of mankind depended on it. His hand tightened on the Scorpion, while his eye measured the width of the louver slits.

Doubt no longer existed in his mind.

Marilyn would have to die!

CANFIELD brought the tiny glistening Scorpion up past his cheeks. He held it parallel to his temples, just even with his pupils, so his eyes might sight over the stubby planed barrel. He peered between the sharp aluminum slats.

The room he saw inside was bleak except for a small circular table, barely a foot high, that occupied the exact center of the floor.

Marilyn stood on one side of the furnishing; the hulking shape of Flug faced her from the other. She was showing the Leagueman a portrait in a stereoprism. But as she held the jewel up, the light caught its facets in such a dazzling glow that Canfield could not make out whom the trimensional photo represented.

His trigger finger tightened. As he traced his sight pattern and saw the needle-shell would strike in her breast, he began squeezing imperceptibly.

A tenth of a second after the shot was fired, her body would begin to disintegrate into its component molecules. Without agony, it was said - - - but who knew for sure? In less than three seconds, however, it was a certainty she would be a haze of golden atoms swirling into mist, as if someone had suddenly admitted the sun into the room and the sudden block of light had caught motes of dust in motion.

Pain coagulated in the emotional centers of Canfield's brain, closing the synapses between mind and digital muscles. The blocking of the neuron impulses gave him a second or so to contemplate his action - - - and the second sufficed. Revulsion assailed him. He couldn't do it. Not to a person whom he had lived with, whom he had slept with - - - no, no matter what her crimes.

He lowered the Scorpion. Let her live while she might, he thought - - - she would die soon enough at somebody's hand.

Maintaining his caution, Canfield continued his exploration of the balcony. About thirty feet further on, he found a shaft which afforded him a descent to the ground level. Instinct told him he was on the right track. He moved on and the new passageway brought him presently to the same reception room he had first entered. The track-wheeled robot on duty again asked for his card. Finding it in order, the automaton took Canfield's robes from him and let him depart.

Hardly had he stepped outside, when a copter similar to the one that brought him from Denver Center swooped down and landed just beyond the edge of the lunar walk

Canfield voted the League silent thanks for its efficiency in arranging transportation. He began running. Ten seconds later, he was aloft.

AT THE monorail terminal, Canfield learned that the next train east would not leave for forty more minutes. He put a coin in the slot of a robot vendor. The machine promptly delivered him a photo-facsimile copy of the Denver *Post*. He strolled into the cafe and ordered himself a meal· tetraploid steak with lunar-grown mushrooms, electronically grilled, plus french fries; chef salad and syntho-coffee.

He quickly scanned the thin sheets of the paper, a page at a glance. Again, the press revealed better than anyone else how the matriarchs had affected the trend of civilization. The world

was restless as ever, it seemed, but on more uneven keel. Two lines of sports news vied with twelve columns of fashions for editorial space. Opinions were indistinguishable from reportage. The six-color realistic comic section seemed more bent than ever on dredging up ghastly episodes of the past and presenting them as romantic and educational. In one strip in particular, Buchenwald, Nanking, the Atomic Battle of Vienna, the Slave Camps of the Lena, all were made grist for the mill. The plot concerned a seven-year-old girl and her ageless dog who probed all of the past in a soap bubble time-machine. *Damnable* trash, Canfield thought disgustedly.

Suddenly, toward the end of his meal, he stiffened. Marilyn had just strolled into the restaurant and taken an open booth by herself near the electronic doorway. When he left, Canfield would have to walk directly by her - - - unless he chose to make himself more conspicuous by ducking through the android-manned kitchen.

She could not possibly recognize him. His features were the features of Oliver Brown. Forty or more years had been erased from his frame to give him the thews of an athlete.

But nevertheless, the fear persisted. He could not force it from his alarmed arteries. Somehow, Canfield felt, if he ever got close to her, she would *know*. Call her ability intuition, instinct, or some kind of clairvoyance peculiar to women alone, it made no difference - - - he knew she would possess it and the sixth sense would serve to betray him to her

He glanced at the chronometer on his wrist. Five more minutes - - - and the monorail would depart. There was no way out. He would have to take the risk. He had no doubt now that Marilyn had known Oliver Brown, not since he had discovered for certain that she was the woman who had whispered the message at the Radium Cabana.

Canfield got up, paid his check and started across the room. Just as he came abreast of Marilyn, she looked up from reading a menu. He smiled.

Marilyn's lips started to phrase an opening remark when suddenly her eyes dropped from his face. Canfield quickly realized the mistake he had made. She was staring not at him but at the collar-band radio. Could it be that it had touched some chord in her memory?

He tried to dismiss the repugnant possibility. There were a hundred thousand identical models of the gadget being worn throughout the land - - - and yet - - - yet, it had been an error to keep on wearing it. Canfield resolved to rid himself of it as soon as possible.

Now, Marilyn's eyes, blue and guileless, rose to meet his own. Canfield's search failed to discover a flicker of aroused suspicion in their depths. She said, "Hello, Oliver. We always seem to bump into each other on the run."

"So it appears," said Canfield. Inwardly, he began to sweat a little. For a moment, when she looked up at him, he had thought she was about to say: "Hello, Dormouse."

"I presume you're dashing for the monorail right now."

"Well, yes . . . " he told her.

She smiled, the corners of her mouth crinkling in the pleasant manner that had once delighted him. "Then, don't let me detain you, Oliver. But it was nice seeing you - - - and I must say you're looking younger than ever."

"And you, too," said Canfield.

"Why not?" Marilyn returned. "Don't we patronize the same specialists . . . ?"

A shiver of horror pinched at Canfield's heart. Marilyn, a *retread*, too? It had not occurred to him that she would be one of the *ever-young*, her own origins lost in the same antiquity as Oliver Brown and all the others? Since he had discovered she was in Gorken's pay, he had turned over in his mind

several possibilities concerning her - - - but nothing like this.

Despite the sudden shocked turmoil in his brain, Canfield's features maintained an imperturbed neutrality. "I guess . . . in a way . . . we owe it to ourselves," he said.

"Of course," smiled Marilyn. "But you must run, Oliver. You've only three minutes - - - if I'm right and you *are* going back east."

THE MONORAIL train gathered speed as it cleared the suburbs, until presently it had attained its normal four-mile-a-minute clip on the straightaway. Canfield, Denver safely behind him, settled down to a two-and-one-half hour period of enforced leisure.

He felt unhappy, confused. His sense of failure oppressed him. The world seemed unreal and his racing mind tended to drown itself in chaotic thoughts.

Night fell over the land, about the time the train screamed through Abilene. Canfield wondered, depressedly, what Picozzi's next move would be - - - now that the first attempt on Gorken had led to nothing. Would he require that Canfield continue in the role of Brown? It would seem that the value of the impersonation had already been over-jeopardized.

Idly, Canfield ran his fingers over the miniature receiver he wore about his neck. He had resolved to get rid of it. But how? The windows of the coach were sealed. There was no way to move from car to car, unless the entire train was at rest. He would have to wait, it appeared, until he reached Kansas City.

Still disturbed, he got up and walked to the front of the car.

In the vestibule, he noted a scanner panel. Six circular screens scanned and reproduced the interiors of the other five coaches, as well as the ever-changing terrain of the monorail right-of-way as illumined by the headlight of the puller-cab.

Canfield studied the screens. A rather riotous party seemed to be in progress among the passengers of Car Two, directly ahead of him. Convention delegates, Canfield suppositioned; members of the League of Women Boilermakers enroute to hi-jinks and hilarity somewhere.

He shifted his glance. Car One offered no contrast, as far as noise and splash were concerned. It contained a troupe of school children, who were probably taking in the annual tour of the bomb blast memorials.

Suddenly, he froze to alertness. Bored at first, he had merely allowed himself a casual glance at Car Four, registering the picture on his mind without consciously studying it. But a fraction of a second later, the image of Skink had thrust itself to the fore in his brain - - - and he had wheeled around to take a second look at the screen.

It was Skink! Skink in the same drab green uniform he had worn in the council chamber. Skink was on the same train with him. Skink was in the next car.

Skink was following him.

CANFIELD'S mind began debating avenues of escape. He glanced at the time. He had twenty minutes before the train would slide into the monorail terminal. Twenty minutes to plan his future. A cold abnormal sweat developed in his body. On his tanned unlined forehead, it created a film of moisture as thin as an aqueous tension layer.

He moved out of the vestibule, returned rapidly to his chair. What should he do? Skink, he knew, would not hesitate in assassinating him anywhere along the route between the terminal and the tetraploid farm at Jackson Space Station. Someone had become suspicious and tipped him off - - - but

who? Flug? Gorken? It was even possible the husky recording robot in the council chamber had relayed an adverse report. Or Marilyn, even? She could have visicalled Skink and had him jet-plane down to Dodge City to board the monorail as it came in.

Suddenly, Canfield's delicate senses detected a slowing in the movement of the train. That was odd. No more stops were scheduled until Kansas City, fifteen or twenty miles distant.

The braking continued, nibbling up the miles at a much slower pace. Abruptly, Canfield's body was hurled against the side of the car as the train swerved along a curve. He hazarded a guess at the cause for the deceleration. They were being shunted to a side-track to let an intercontinental express enter the big uptown terminal ahead of them. As soon as the faster train sped by them, they would leave the siding and pick up velocity.

If he planned to act, now was the only time that would ever be allowed to him. Canfield gazed around. The few other passengers in his car were either engrossed with reading matter or were sleeping. Several looked as if they'd popped short-nap hypno-tablets into their mouths to get them over the ennui of the trip.

Canfield pried further. He discovered the neo-glass panes of his window were reinforced by a sheath of transparent rigidium. Not even a diamond drill would do more than leave scratches in the barrier.

He got up and returned to the vestibule. A glance at the screen showed him that Skink, in the car behind, had also gotten up from his seat and was moving forward. Canfield's eye moved on to the first screen, the scanner that transmitted a view of the right-of-way ahead. Judging by the ragged skyline that loomed darkly in view, the train was passing through some deserted war-torn section of the metropolis. Ancient brick buildings showed in the gloom on either side.

In a moment, Canfield knew, the train would switch back to the main track - - - and he would have lost the opportunity to elude Skink forever.

He tested the exit door of the car. Designed for frequent opening and closing, it did not present the same formidable obstacle the seat window had. Canfield brought out the Scorpion, checked the gun's clip-charger, and reduced the energy-level of the shot he proposed to fire.

Then, he aimed at the lock and blasted. A square foot section of the door glowed white-hot, then melted and dripped away in fiery drops. The exit barrier rattled open. Chill air whistled in.

Canfield checked the time-interval between the gleaming metal stanchions as they floated by. Finally, he came to an area where a blind leap was worth the chance. He flung himself out into the night.

The ground hit the soles of his feet hard. He stumbled on landing, fell, rolled over twice in thorny knee-high shrubbery. As he rose to his feet, he saw the last brightly-lighted car dwindle down the monorail track and vanish beyond the horizon. Complete darkness now surrounded him.

Canfield sought to get his bearings. He suspected he was somewhere up the flat river valley of the Kaw. He looked upward at the gloomy sky. A cloud rifted and he spotted two familiar stars: Procyon, and not far beyond it, Pollux. That was all he needed. He orientated himself, searched the horizon and spotted a glow almost due east.

Now, he realized completely where he was. In the bombed-out flats of the old city.

Simultaneously, his ears caught a sudden shuffling movement in the dark ahead. Rubble clattered. Canfield immediately dropped, ducked behind a half-

demolished brick chimney that arose some fifty yards back from the monorail track.

A moment later, the noise repeated itself. Nearer. Someone was hurrying down the right-of-way, back-tracking from the train. Someone human, Canfield judged, even though the steps were light-footed. A moment later, the clouds parted a second time.

A shaft of light descended that brought the entire landscape into silvery view. Canfield saw the beefy form of Skink, less than a hundred yards from him. The big man was crouching near the track - - - alert, cautious, waiting for the protecting dark to return. His body was frozen like a block of stone. But his ears were undoubtedly bent for every stray noise - - - and it was a good bet, thought Canfield, that the man's beady eyes could search out the slightest moving shadow.

Canfield stooped and picked up a stone. He tossed it across the monorail in a high curving arc. It fell with a clanging noise against a pile of twisted rusted metal.

Skink wheeled instantly. His thick right arm came up and a blast of red flame darted from it. The scrap heap exploded into a pillar of incandescent flame, while metal fragments showered down over a wide circle.

The overcast returned to blot out the sky. Canfield decided to take advantage of the darkness to retreat from his hiding place. His eyes were now well-adjusted to the dark. Behind him, he spotted a paved alleyway that ran off perpendicularly for an unknown distance into the devastated area. Canfield skulked across the court and then ran down the alley as rapidly as he could in silence.

But he had misjudged the keenness of Skink's hearing. When he stopped after a minute to listen for sounds of pursuit, he heard the slap-slap of feet only a few yards behind him in the dark.

Canfield resumed running. On either side of him loomed high crumbling walls, relics of ancient bombed-out factories. Many of these buildings had operated as packing houses, he remembered. Now, grim and distorted in shape by the eerie light, they bore a closer resemblance to the deserted battlements of ruined castles. Castles that housed nameless crawling terrors inside . . .

THE ALLEYWAY narrowed. It became virtually a footpath over endless rubble. Then abruptly, it turned and Canfield found himself blocked in by a *cul-de-sac*. Ahead, his straining vision could make out only the huge shell of a building. Its broken empty doorway afforded him the only possible passage - - - other than turning back.

Distrustful of trapping himself in the unknown ruin, Canfield wheeled and started to double back. But, already it was too late! Before he could reach the first corner, Skink fired at him again - - - blindly - - - from somewhere in the dark. A globe of incandescent flame exploded between the two men - - - hunter and hunted. Canfield was forced back.

Sweating desperately, he realized he would have to stumble through the wrecked building. He stepped across the moldering threshold. Inside, his eyes blinked at a darkness that was stygian, impenetrable. A few yards to his right, his ears caught restless pattering sounds. Fear of vermin immediately prompted him to swing away. He staggered against a jagged thrown beam that cut his face. Again, he turned, groped in another direction. As he did, a chittering noise welled up through the building. Something with tiny feet ran across his shoes. Canfield's flesh crawled, involuntarily.

For another fifty yards, he continued making progress. All his senses had to operate in coordinated unison to get him

through the dark. Underneath his shoes, the ground was soft, squishy. He felt relief that he wasn't carrying a flash beam, as it might have not been pleasant or edifying to get a good look at *what* he was walking on.

Presently, Canfield bumped into a second wall, wet and slimy to the touch. He followed it. Soon, he found himself in front of an exit that framed part of the horizon. He stepped outside. The doorway opened on a narrow shelf of land bordering some kind of a pit.

A moment later, the clouded sky lightened slightly. Canfield made out more details of the dim landscape. The ledge rimmed the pit for nearly a quarter of a mile.

Before going on, Canfield made an effort to reorientate himself. His eidetic memory reconstructed a map he'd once seen of this area. He visualized his position on it and recalled that beyond the depression, along the opposite side, a series of steps rose to the bluffs that overhung the valley. The pit, itself, was a partially-filled crater where an atomic shell had hit in one of the air battles over the old part of the city.

Canfield's eyes now noted a pale phosphorescent glow that arose from the depths of the pit. Recognition of the hideous danger that lurked below steeled him. After almost half a century, the gouged-out earth in this area was still alive with deadly radioactivity.

He debated which way he should skirt the atomic crater - - - along the right or left rim? The path along the left suggested itself as slightly smoother going. But suddenly, the scene darkened again, blotting out the opportunity for further reconnaissance.

Canfield began running.

Before he had gained a hundred yards, however, his quickened ears caught the same chittering sound he'd heard inside the deserted factory. This time, the noise was multiplied a hundred times. He halted and tried to locate the sibiliant noise. All around him, a vast rustling movement seemed to be in progress.

At that moment, Skink fired a third shot at him. It erupted into a volcanic cone of fire back in the gloomy shadows. The explosion created a cascading fountain of light that etched the surrounding terrain in sharp chiaroscuro. Canfield ducked behind a pile of masonry. He saw no future in running as long as the illumination made him such an excellet target.

Suddenly, he heard a guttural groan. It emanated at the spot where Skink should have emerged from the factory. A few seconds later, it was followed by a piercing inhuman scream that sent cold shivers along Canfield's flesh. *What in the name of God was happening?*

Chancing his own destruction, he pulled his body up, inch by inch, brick by brick, until he reached the top of the masonry heap. There, he hugged himself flat against a layer of rubble and peered down at the scene he had just vacated.

The burning light from the cone of fire still illuminated the area. Just within its flickering rage, Canfield's horrified eyes at last made out the source of the ghastly scream - - - it had been forced out of the throat of Skink. Surrounded on the edge of the pit by his new enemies, Skink was flailing and kicking out against a score or more of maddened rats!

Again the scream echoed across the pit. More rats appeared. Skink struggled against them, while his mouth frothed, gesticulated. At any second, the horde of creatures threatened to swarm over the hulking League pursuer - - - biting, snapping, clawing - - - even as their insane small voices kept up an incessant squeaky piping.

Then, while Canfield was watching, Skink stumbled. The rats leaped up, sailing through the air at his throat,

pouncing upon his shoulders, crawling around his face. Skink's thick right hand dropped a glistening weapon it held, a broken cylinder that remotely resembled a machine pistol or advanced type of blaster. The big man fell on his hands and knees to the ground - - - whether to search for the weapon or because of weariness, Canfield could not tell.

But whatever the cause, it was soon apparent that Skink could not lift the weight of his faltering body up again. His drooping hands and lower limbs disappeared from view in an undulating sea of brown rodent bodies. Agonizing seconds later, Skink's whole massive frame began to go under - - - as if it were being dragged down into the soft earth by an unseen tide from below. Canfield realized - - - sick with revulsion - - - that the rats were devouring the flesh off his enemy's body wherever they could make contact. Alive and conscious, Skink was being eaten as rapidly as if he had fallen into a vat of acid!

Three breaths later, all was over. Skink had become a red pulpy mass - - - and then, finally, nothing recognizable at all as the rats were joined by dozens and dozens of their brethren, and then scores . . and then hundreds!

NOW, Canfield awakened with horror to his own situation. More rats came. A living flood of rodents giant in size, overflowed from the atom pit. Scrambling over the ground, they charged in mass ranks - - - swarming in either direction as far as Canfield's eye could see.

Never had he ever seen such an obscene revulsive brood of life. Small red eyes, full of fury, glared out of whiskered faces. Horror had been piled upon horror - - - but now a supreme horror became apparent to Canfield. The grotesque appearance of the beasts was doubled by the greenish sheen to their fur. It gleamed like phosphorescent fire. These were mutated rats, Canfield suddenly realized; creatures which had adapted themselves and their progeny to the scarred rocks of the bomb pits. The menace was increased. Usually, the bite of such monstrous spawn produced slow lingering death.

So far, the rats had taken no notice of Canfield. But, he realized it was only a matter of time until they caught his scent and again milled in maddened frenzy. He wondered - - - detachedly - - - why the aura of his own fear hadn't already attracted them to his place of hiding. He had no doubt that his own odor was even now being broadcast through the low muggy air of the flats.

Still, the rats came. How many thousands could the pit possibly hold? What did they live on? How could any but a few ever survive?

Science knew no answer, except that which lay in the hardy nature of the mutated breed, itself. Wherever in the world man had gone, wherever he had explored and adapted himself, the rats had always managed to follow behind him and adapt accordingly. Jungles, deserts, polar regions, icy tundras - - - all had been alike. But now the rats had gone beyond man. They had altered their own cellular structure so completely that they could now exist and breed where man died, an environment that was utterly deadly to the race that had hated, fought and sheltered rats for so long.

An inauspicious breeze stirred over the dark terrain. Canfield's nerves were as taut as coiled springs. He pushed his flattened body deeper into the rubbly space atop the masonry pile. The maneuver might help prevent his human odor from carrying. He hoped so . . .

But suddenly, the toe of his shoe caught, hooked into a projection in the bricks. A piece of mortar slipped, fell with a clatter toward the ground.

Instantly, the chittering ceased. Silence cloaked the misty ground as if ten

thousand tiny ears had simultaneously heard the betraying noise and were waiting the signal to launch a mass attack.

Seeking to divert the beasts' attention, Canfield aimed the Scorpion into the farthest flank of the invaders. He pressed the chp to "fan" position and squeezed the trigger. The charge exploded, carving a wide swathe of destruction in the horde. Along the perimeter of the blast area, the wounded rats were turned upon by their unhurt fellows - - - and a gory cannibal feast followed. The ranks closed in again, solidified. And the myriad piping shrieks resumed.

Canfield shuddered. The night was early, yet. How much longer could he hope to avoid discovery? Not too long, he was afraid. He would never last out the vigil to dawn.

The rats began stirring again - - - and he fired the Scorpion a second time. Again, he achieved a certain amount of bloody destruction. Again, the tide of beasts flowed in, filled the gap.

A sudden squeaking, louder than usual, penetrated to his ears. Instinctual knowledge that a new situation had developed made Canfield roll over, unheeding of discovery. His gaze ran down the length of his body - - - and then stopped short, transfixed. His hackles crawled

Less than six inches from his feet, a more adventurous rat than its brethren stood upon its haunches watching him with wicked-looking blood-red eyes. The huge three-pound beast had climbed the rubble. Its fur glistened as if it had been dragged through a bath of luminous green paint.

In the next moment, the rat leaped. Its bared teeth pointed for Canfield's throat.

Canfield blocked the attack by jutting out his arm in a purely defensive gesture. The rat clung to his sleeve, ripping its claws through the cloth. He tried to sweep the animal away, but it clung doggedly. Finally desperately, Canfield seized the rodent by its tail and dashed its brains out against the brick.

A second later, another rat appeared - - - and then a third. Gagging with revulsion, Canfield strangled the one and kicked the other off his perch. He yearned with desperation for a practical weapon. A club, a ball bat - - - anything. The Scorpion was no good at close quarters. Now, a fourth and fifth rat had climbed to his perch. Mindful of Skink's fate, Canfield fought with grim fury to rid himself of them - - - reduced to the level of a savage beast, himself.

More monsters kept coming. The smell of blood beat into their maddened nostrils, fanned their enraged brains. Canfield began to suffer deep bites and long slashing scratches in the battle. Minutes passed - - - minutes the length of hours. He felt like a prisoner who has been marooned on a lonely rock in a sea swarming with rats. The creatures washed up on his place of refuge in endless waves - - - miniature demons of clawing, nipping fury that never retreated. Though he kicked the beasts away, though he swept them off the pile with the side of his shoes or stopped them sometimes with flung rubble or battered them loose with bricks, replacements never stopped flowing in.

Now, his trouser legs were torn and tattered. Blood gushed freely from a dozen wounds. His time sense blurred, became strangely altered, as the combat without end continued. The seconds were dragging, aching nightmares for him. Time and time again, he aimed a low-level energy charge at the base of his refuge and succeeded in wiping out several hundred potential attackers in one swathe. But the ceaseless hordes never failed to close ranks and renew the battle.

At last, Canfield knew he was finished.

The Scorpion was virtually exhausted. Still, there was no end to the rats. More of them swarmed up out of the atom-

scarred pit. Exhaustion racked his body; every muscle was screaming in agony; every nerve was a twitching loose ganglion that danced like a jangling high tension wire. All his youthful strength, the stamina and exuberance of his marvelously-endowed body, was now at an end.

He knew well what he faced. He could either go down fighting - - - or he could grant himself a quick merciful end by turning the last needle-charge from the weapon on his own body.

Yet somehow - - - even in the face of inevitable defeat - - - the thought of suicide was repulsive to him. For him, life was an infinitely-treasured possession. Even its last few seconds were valuable beyond all price.

Canfield pointed the mini-weapon at the rat attackers that were milling on the ground nearest to the pile of masonry on which he stood. He released the last charge. A temporary gap was carved in the horde, as a wide circle of rat bodies disintegrated into atoms.

But the final blow was - - - at best - - - a feeble one. The rodents massed and returned. No visible dent in their numbers showed.

"Well, come on, damn you!" Canfield's weary dust-filled throat shouted. "Come on, get me! What are you waiting for?"

Fifty thousand pairs of red eyes gleamed up at him. Hot burning coals in a living carpet. But the rats made no immediate move to advance, as if the sound of a human voice had temporarily bewildered them

Then at the next moment, Canfield suddenly heard a sound that resembled rolling thunder. A sound that made him imagine in his delirium that the atom pit had echoed back his voice, had magnified it a thousand reverberating times.

The rats began running in crazy circles. They seem to be panicked by a new fear. The thundering voice from overhead repeated intelligible words. Canfield suddenly realized it was coming out of the darkened sky, itself. Simultaneously, his ears picked up a second sound that was even more welcomed - - - the sound made by a descending jet-copter.

A vibration much like the shock-wave from a detonated explosion filled the night air. Canfield recognized the effect from a sonic wave and flung himself flat, even as the demoralized army of rats began to retreat to the pit in disorganized array, leaving behind not only corpses but scores and hundreds of sprawled comrades still kicking, still clawing - - - on their backs - - - at a nameless enemy The pilot of the whirly bird was destroying them by waves from a sonic generator.

Now, the jet-copter lowered into full view. It fluttered toward Canfield. The sonic beam ceased for a moment and a spotlight roved over the area. Finally, it focused on the place where Canfield, weak from loss of blood and shock, was scrambling to his feet.

A second later, Canfield heard Juano Picozzi s voice, electronically amplified, call out to him. And in the next second, consciousness slipped from him.

THIS WILL be a hospital, Canfield thought while his eyes were still closed. *On all sides, I will be faced by pure white hospital walls. Soft and antiseptic. Why do I know this? Because no other man seems to have such a propensity for coming awake in etherized circumstances. Others might wake in their own beds, in hotel rooms, on park benches, in ditches - - - even on strato-rockets bound for Cairo. But fate never varies its pattern for me.*

He cautiously pried open one eyelid. He looked around.

Fate had not let him down, he discovered His new environment was indisputably hospital-like in nature. A blank ceiling with ventilator louvers first greeted his eye. Then his glance

lowered, traveled slowly around the room. Suddenly, it came to rest on Juano Picozzi, who was seated in a chair just to the left of the bed on which Canfield lay.

Canfield grinned: "All right, how'd you manage it this time?"

"Simple," Picozzi answered, his eyes crinkling. "The Ones charted all the probability factors. They figured a blow-up was about due along your casual pattern. I just came along, erased the final maneuver on the part of the enemy."

"That's just fine," Canfield retorted. His mood swiftly changed to sarcasm. "So, I'm not only a secret agent for the Ones - - - but I'm also supposed to double as their personal sitting duck."

"It was unavoidable," Picozzi replied. "Skink was one of Gorken's bulwarks. We had to get him out of the way - - - in order to smooth the path for your penetration of Gorken's inner defenses."

"And if he'd clobbered me . . . or the rats had got me, then what?"

"We'd have tried enlisting a new agent somehow."

Canfield rotated his eyes to the ceiling in a gesture of mock derision. Then, he allowed his face to broaden once more into a grin. "Okay, I should quarrel - - - you pulled me out of the stew in the end. But next time, don't make it such a close shave."

"I got fouled up by some engine trouble - - - or I'd have been along a half hour sooner," Picozzi explained.

"How'd you expect to find me in that God-forsaken place, anyhow?"

"Don't forget the ultimate weapon we planted on you. Long as you're not dead, I can trace you anywhere on the globe through it."

"That's nice to know. *You* can always find me . . . but I can't always find you. So I'm loused up."

"Nobody fights a war for the benefit of one soldier," said Picozzi.

Canfield looked sheepish. "I guess you're right, at that."

Picozzi smiled. Then, his tan features turned serious. "We've got to operate like meson bullets - - - from here on out. The matriarchs are getting itchy again about you, Jaime. I'd recommend killing Farson immediately, if I thought it would slow them up until our big job's done. But instinct tells me *no vale la pena* - - - no dice."

"So we let our sleeping dog lie?"

"Sure. Even let him bloodhound around the place a little. But if he pops something, squash him."

"I get your point." Canfield grinned. "One more thing I want settled. You knew all the time about Marilyn?"

"She was at the meeting?"

"You're damned right she was, Juano. What's more, I feel sure she tipped off Skink her suspicions of me. But, *you* held out on me . . . that's what I'm sore about."

"*Lo siento*," said Picozzi. "I am sorry. She was a *doubtful*. The Ones had her classified that way, pending further developments on the altered time-track that would nail her down for good. They're chronoprobing right now to see what happens as a result of her encounter with you."

"Lot of good that does," said Canfield. "The shotgun shell's in the fire, now."

"Perhaps, the Ones want it that way."

"*Kismet*, eh? Well, old friend, I don't like *kismet* and I don't share your fatalism. And I'm tired of having my personal destiny kicked around. Next time, I'll handle Gorken in my own way."

"That's what you are expected to do," Picozzi replied, with a Latin shrug.

"That's what I *will* do," Canfield said, determined to get in the last word. He glanced about the room, saw no chronometer or calendar. "How long have I been cooped up here, anyhow?"

"Three days. You recovered fast. Remarkable constitution, the local staff said."

"That's enough time," said Canfield.

"I'm getting out of here."

He started to slip out of bed when Picozzi made an agile leap to his side and gently pressed a nerve on the side of his neck. Canfield felt his head and face grow numb. The room blurred, grew dark, and he lapsed quickly into a second coma.

ON HIS second wakening, Canfield felt immeasurably more refreshed. His senses triggered to instant alertness, as he snapped to consciousness. He noticed that someone else had slipped in and taken over the chair which had formerly held Picozzi. Someone far prettier to look at than the Latin psychiatrist. Someone whom he recognized with wildly-accelerating heart before his lids had half-opened - - - Ann Luzanne!

He called her name.

"Oh, my darling," she cried, rushing to his side. "I was so afraid you would die." She laid her head upon his chest. "The way they brought you in, slashed, bleeding . . . those horrible wounds. If Picozzi had only warned me - - - "

"Picozzi?" Canfield echoed, involuntarily.

"He finally broke down, told me all," Ann said. Her voice was reduced almost to a whisper.

Canfield found her warm presence comforting. But he also found it exciting and exhilarating. Never before, he thought, had he held her so close. Never had he found her so affectionate, so willing to be held. He ran his fingers through her bright red hair where it fell in pretty ringlets upon her shoulder. This was *love*, he told himself. This was mind showing its true resiliency against age.

"I don't know who you are," Ann confessed. "Juano told me you're not Oliver Brown - - - and that's all I needed to know. I know the rest."

"What rest?" Canfield asked. He was beginning to be puzzled.

For answer, she placed a finger against his lips, then returned it to her own. It was more meaningful than a kiss would ever have been. Her eyes searched Canfield's, as if trying to reach to the personality locked behind them in his brain.

"Whoever you are," she said, "I started wondering about you the moment you came to meet me at the farm. I knew you were different, and my heart leaped - - - I thought Oliver had changed. But presently, I began to suspect . . . that you were somebody else in Oliver's body. Someone more cultured, less worldly-weary. Someone completely uncruel, although more aggressive in certain situations than Oliver had ever been. I never dreamed . . . "

" . . . what?"

"That Dr. Picozzi was playing another of his cosmic-inspired jokes on me. All for a noble purpose, of course. But still with an element of Spanish-flavored humor in it. But that's Juano, for you."

"As I have reason to know, myself," said Canfield.

Ann caressed his forehead. "It must have been an endless nightmare, standing off those hideous rats. What I've suffered for the Cause has been nothing . . . "

"The Cause?"

"Haven't you guessed? I'm an agent of Juano's, too."

Suddenly, Canfield remembered. Picozzi had admitted that day in the hideaway north of Los Angeles that there was another agent whose name he did not choose to reveal at the moment.

To think all that time since, the operative had actually been Ann Luzanne, this lovely vivacious girl here at his side. This girl with smiling eyes, so changed, so different, from the brilliant corporation secretary who had worked by his side these past weeks. This girl who had shared his evenings, posed as his fiancee, yet never quite allowed him to

know her any more intimately . . .

He said: "Juano certainly never lets the right hand know what the left hand's doing - - - "

Ann smiled. "That's his way. But right now, I've got something more important to pour into your ears. You might as well know, darling - - - " Suddenly she paused, blushed. " - - - uh - - - "

"Uh what?"

"I can't call you Oliver, now. Not to your face What is your name?"

"Canfield," he grinned. "James Canfield. Picozzi burned some very important bridges behind me, when he made me give it up - - - "

"It doesn't matter," Ann replied. "Just so I know it." She tried it on the tip of her tongue. "James." She smiled, repeated it again. "James Canfield. It's a nice name . . . "

"You were going to say?"

"Brace yourself for a shock," she declared. "After all, this is the twenty-first century - - - and we girls have got certain rights we never had back in the old-fashioned days. It's true I was engaged to the old Oliver. Whether I'd have gone ahead and buro-mated him is something else - - - after all, just getting engaged was only something Juano dreamed up to help me keep a closer tab on Brown's movements - - - "

"I see."

"Believe me darling, I'd never have - - - "

"Don't say a word," said Canfield. "So you never dreamed Picozzi'd introduce a ringer on you?"

"Why no."

"And now?"

"You devil," she said. "Don't you know I'm trying to lay my case before you." She paused, took a deep breath. "You might as well have it now, James Canfield. I'm in love with you."

Two hundred years ago, thought Canfield, *or even a hundred, we'd have played a scene like this in a moonlit garden or on a dark porch or in a vehicle somewhere. But times have changed. We have a matriarch government. We're practical. We don't propose on jet-cruises, anymore. And we let the female of the species speak out for what she wants.*

In a way, it was quite equalizing - - - and Canfield acknowledged there was justice in the new customs and morals.

But just the same, he felt cheated of his male birthright. Well, there was one way he knew to rectify that unhappy feeling in a hurry. That was to seize back the initiative from this lovely girl with dancing green eyes who had proposed to him so neatly, so sincerely - - - and yet so utterly unconscious that she had pricked the eternal masculine ego.

He proceeded to work.

Five minutes later, Ann gasped for breath, withdrew trembling from his embrace, her ability to regain her composure completely shattered. Her cheeks were flushed and warm. Her roguish eyes had widened until her pupils resembled saucers.

She whispered: "Why, certainly darling, I'll buro-mate you. I'd scratch the eyes out of any other girl in the world who tried to get you. Now, ask me the same thing again, please. All my life, I want to remember the lovely way it sounded - - - "

Canfield obligingly repeated.

Finally, they separated again. Ann gave voice to a mock whistle. "Hey, you're supposed to be a sick man! What will you be able to do when you're well?"

Canfield flashed a slow grin, without answering.

But just at that moment, he thought of Marilyn. A shadow flitted across his mind. His heart abruptly sickened. Happiness for him and Ann was still a long way off, he suspected.

JUANO PICOZZI came in the room again, later in the day. He held a

brief conference with Ann and Canfield, during which the latter jokingly berated him for not having revealed Ann Luzanne's true place in the game to him, previously. Picozzi replied that it was the will of the Ones.

"Well, the wraps are off, now," said Canfield. "Ann knows I'm not Brown - - - and we've just renewed our engagement to be buro-mated."

"In that case," said Picozzi, "perhaps Ann should tell you who *she* really is."

Ann turned to Canfield. "I'm sorry, darling. I was going to get around to it - - - "

"It can't possibly matter," said Canfield. "If you were the original Witch of Endor, I'd still love you - - - "

"That's sweet," said Ann. She paused, swallowed. "The fact is, however - - - my real name's Joanna Lucevelt. My mother was - - - "

It flashed to him, then.

"Eleanora Lucevelt," Canfield supplied. Certain facts meshed into new patterns, as his mind operated at cyclotronic velocity. "You don't have to say it. The first matriarch president - - - "

"Assassinated twenty years ago," Picozzi interrupted just then to add.

"You don't have to tell me history!" snapped Canfield. He turned back to Ann. "But, why are you fighting the matriarchs?"

She returned his glance, bit her lip and he hastily added, "I want to know. I'm genuinely perplexed."

"Because they have subverted the original ideals of my mother," Ann finally said. "She wanted equality of the sexes, not rivalry. When the male ratio returned to normal in the population, she planned to offer the men politicians equal share in the government. But after her death, her followers wrote that plank out of the platform."

"Nice greedy people," commented Canfield. "Like the League."

"Exactly like the League," Ann shot back. "I hate them both. That's why I consented to work for Juano."

"What she means," Picozzi said, stepping in, "is that she realizes the matriarchs will fall when the League falls. Gorken's long-range plan, as you've gathered by now, is to weaken the government more and more - - - until sometime in the next fifty years, his men will take over. What the country will get is a tyrannical male government - - - instead of a soft female administration. Oppression will still be with us - - - and three hundred years from now, planet-wide slavery."

"You see, James," Ann said, turning earnestly back to Canfield, "I know that the matriarchs are just long-range pawns of Gorken. They think they act independently - - - and yet they're acting under compulsion just the same. But if Gorken dies - - - well, you tell him, Juano - - "

"If Gorken dies, the matriarchs will follow along a different time-pattern," Picozzi said to Canfield. "Within five years, the regime will fall apart. *De repente*, quite suddenly, North America will achieve normality."

"I see," said Canfield. "Know something? I think it's worth fighting for."

"We still have a lot of work ahead of us," Picozzi reminded.

"I guess I gummed up the works in Denver," Canfield said. "As I told you, what I thought was Gorken turned out to be one of those osmium-plated recording robots. What's our next move?"

"To the best of my knowledge, Gorken's suspicions still aren't strong," Picozzi replied. "Skink was killed while Gorken was still out of phase. You struck Flug from behind when he came out of the council chamber. The Ones' chrono-predictors believe that Gorken will summon you for a personal talk in the next week or so - - - to explain your mystifying actions. If Skink took it upon himself to follow you, you're safe. But if he did it under orders - - - well - - - "

Picozzi shrugged, "- - - what you want is to get in a position to kill Gorken, isn't it?"

"You're confusing me, now," Canfield protested. "Didn't you tell me you planned that episode on the monorail tracks, just so we could lure Skink from the clinic and destroy him."

"Not I, the Ones," said Picozzi. "You forget, every time a causal pattern changes in this time-world, that unborn world of the Ones in the future is also changed. What they have foreseen and planned one moment, becomes in the next an unanalyzable factor they have had forced upon them."

"But ultimately, a factor that can be integrated?"

"Yes. Their strategy must - - - from our one-position viewpoint - - - seem to follow a completely schizoid pattern. Only in their own time-world do their tactics follow a rigid and relentless form of logic."

Canfield whistled. "Talk about fourth-dimensional chess - - - this is it. One of these days, I'm going to sit down and rewrite Oppenstein's *Philosophy of N-Continua* from preface to index. I think I could do it, too."

"Fifty years from now," said Picozzi, with a knowing smile. "When you're ready to crawl in some ivory tower - - - "

The Latin psychiatrist reached inside his blouse and brought out a sheet of paper, folded in half. He straightened it out and handed it to Canfield, who saw at a second glance that it was actually of thinly-pressed metal foil.

'Forgive me for changing the subject, but this is important - - - and we're running out of time. Look it over. I have to get back to L. A. for a new contact."

Canfield's eye ran rapidly over the stylo-printed page. "I gather it's a report," he said. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Follow it up, soon as you can," Picozzi directed. "You and Ann put Brown, Incorporated, to work on it - - - the whole organization - - - but keep Farson in the dark. The rats might have eaten Skink, but they didn't eat his blaster - - the weapon he was using to fire at you. It was all metal."

"So that's where you got the finger prints?"

"Exactly. Skink was considerably more than a hundred years old, if you want to believe the records I matched his prints up with. Of course, prints can be faked beyond detection. You know that very well, Jaime. But, I fail to see any point in duplicating a dead man's prints in this case. And those I found on the gun were registered originally with a man named Ed Peatty, Nuclear Fireman 1/c. Peatty shipped out and returned with the first Duvall expedition to the moon, *amigo*. Surprising, no?"

"I'd say it was certainly worth looking into," Canfield answered.

"*Bueno*. I ask you to look into it."

THE following day, James Canfield was discharged from the Radiation Hospital at Kansas City. With Ann, he returned to the farm community at Jackson Space Station and resumed his grip on the reins of Oliver Brown, Inc., as though nothing serious had happened. Picozzi, as Canfield had expected, disappeared immediately after the conference in the hospital room.

"Great guy," Canfield said by way of comment to Ann, as Yudkin's successor piloted them out to the tetraploid ranch in a new convertiplane limousine. "Great - - - but elusive."

"He saved your life," Ann declared. Her green eyes sought him out. "Or didn't you know?"

"Think I've forgotten? I was all ready to shake hands with the gang in Valhalla when Juano dropped out of the air . . . scattered those vermin with a sonic disperser. Nobody ever had a friend arrive at a more welcome time - - - "

"But, I don't mean your ordeal by

the bomb pit."

Canfield looked at her, puzzled.

"I mean, in the hospital," she went on. "When they brought you in, drained of blood, virtually dead, infected with radioactive poisons from the vicious bites . . . "

This was news to Canfield.

"Picozzi operated?"

"More than that. He purified your system, cleaned out the isotopic infections that would have killed you - - - "

"How? I knew he was a mutant, but - - - "

"He has a double heart and a radiation-immune blood supply. I was there, when he fought for your life - - - though I knew you only as Oliver Brown, then. You lay on the operating table, clinically dead. Juano lay down on a similar table beside you. Your arteries and veins and his were connected together to make one continuous system. Then, his powerful heart began beating under a tremendous overload, forcing his body's blood through every vessel in your flesh, cleansing and purifying wherever it encountered infection. So you lived, James, where otherwise you would have died.

Canfield was silent for a long moment afterward. He felt humbled, awed. Finally, he broke his silence to say the only thing that could be said: "My life is his. Not in a thousand years could I ever repay him for what he has done for me."

Ann's hand slipped into his. "Don't try," she said. "Just kill Gorken."

AS SOON as he got back to the nerve center of his empire, Canfield put his energies to work gathering information on Nuclear Fireman Ed Peatty - - - and on the ill-fated Duvall Expedition, first attempt of mankind to visit and explore the far side of the moon.

Members of the trouble-shooting staff of the Brown corporation - - - on special orders from Canfield, himself - - - located and microfilmed contemporary news accounts of the Duvall venture. They covered the space project from its genesis at the new Space Astrogation Laboratory at M. I. T. to the final homecoming of the survivors at White Sands.

The official documents and records regarding the lunar attempt, as kept by the Duvall Foundation, were no longer available, unfortunately. They had been destroyed in one of the bombing raids of the Atomic Wars of the '90's. However, tape reels that reproduced visicasts of the Duvall rocket's takeoff and limping return were found and magnetically duplicated. Day by day, the data amassed on Canfield's desk.

Each morning, Canfield studied the information as it was collected and channeled up to him from his underlings. Gradually, a picture formed in his mind - - - a picture that tended to stagger his imagination with the implications that he read into it.

On take-off, a crew of twenty-three had manned the Duvall rocket. Their ship was a clumsy four-stage experimental vessel. In comparison to the single-stage rockets of the modern age, it was as primitive as - - - say - - - Fulton's steamboat stacked up against the nuclear-powered sea freighters of a century and a half later.

Twelve thousand miles above the earth's surface, a meteor plowed through the ship's outer shell, killing twelve men. The eleven crew members who survived landed on the moon's hidden side. They found a few simple-structured forms of life and an oxygen atmosphere roughly equivalent to that of the Tibetan plateau.

Canfield showed Ann what he had found out. "We think we're still in the pioneer stage of space travel," he said. "But compared to the hardships of those poor devils, people nowadays cruise to Luna in luxury. Look at this. The Duvall crew lost five more of their members on the satellite - - - all in unexplained

accidents. Five graves they dug, to be hidden forever from the sight of Earth. That left only six men to get back to Terra however they could."

"But they made it," Ann pointed out. "For the first time in history, six Congressional Medals of Honor were awarded for one deed - - - all passed out the day after the men got back. It's only a few years since I was in college - - - but the history reels were already calling it the greatest feat since Columbus, even then."

"Isabella's jewels - - - Duvall's money," commented Canfield. "That's progress for you. Incited by dreams, but financed by corporation squeezings. Of course - - - " he added, "that doesn't keep the men on the ship from being heroes - - - all six of them. But just the same, something happened - - - something so crazy I still haven't been able to make sense out of it. It's like a jigsaw puzzle in which some of the pieces have been mirror-reversed. They contain the right data, but you can't fit them in unless you give your mind a twist through the mirror, too. It's like wrenching your thoughts through another dimension, to accommodate left-handed concepts - - - "

Canfield inserted a strip of microfilm into a magno-projector. He asked Ann to look at it through the viewplate. "You now see in front of you a photo taken at White Sands. The survivors are just emerging from the Duvall rocket which crash landed on the reservation That's Ed Peatty, the meaty-looking character second from the left. Look familiar? Well, he sure does to me He's Skink, all right. Now, I'll magnify him for a close-up - - - - "

The photo expanded before Ann's eyes, focused on Peatty's face which now occupied the entire square of the screen.

"There is a difference though, in how he looked then and now," said Canfield. "Not so much physically as what you can see in his eyes. He was highly intelligent in those days, intelligent and resourceful. A nuclear fireman has to be a sort of combination of master mechanic and graduate physicist. But when Peatty became Skink, he lost something - - - call it *soul*, call it common humanity, there's no proper word for it in our language, but whatever it was, it went."

"And the other one?" said Ann "The one called Flug?"

"He's there, too. Third from the right. I've checked on him. His name was Chill Eads and he was Chief Astrogator."

"Did the identical thing happen to him?"

Canfield nodded, gravely. "He lost whatever it was that made him human - - - just the same as Peatty."

"Where did they go, what happened to them after the Duvall venture?"

"Both men resigned their positions with the Duvall Foundation. Eads made a return trip to the moon about ten years later. He and Peatty met in Manhattan shortly after. Because they were Medal of Honor winners, it was natural the press would shower them with attention - - - whether they wanted it or not. Here is an ancient photo snapped of them at a reception at Brookhaven. Take a close look at it, Ann." .

Canfield pressed the switch on the magno-projector and the new scene materialized on the viewing screen. "Peatty and Eads have changed, you'll notice. Their features have thickened. They no longer act so much like men, as they do flesh-covered robots. The metamorphosis into Flug and Skink, thuglike, crafty, capable of banter and jokes yet somehow impersonal and deadly serious in their contact with men, was almost complete. They were ready to be Gorken's tools."

"It seems almost unbelevable!"

"Peatty and Eads vanished from view shortly after this last public appearance. All the resources I've been able

to bring to bear have uncovered no further information on their movements. Theoretically, they should have died before the century was over. Obviously, they didn't. That suggests they've gotten the *treatment* - - - though perhaps not like that given the League hierarchy - - - "

"What about the other survivors? There were four more."

"Dead within three months, all of them. Radiation-sickness of some sort that caused their flesh to scale and flake right off them. The medicos claimed it was because they hadn't been properly shielded from all the ultra-hard particles bombarding them after the meteor struck the ship. Cosmics, and that *range* on up."

"Still, Flug and Skink weren't affected."

"No. Not unless they got only a partial dose, affecting minor changes - - - and I don't like to accept that."

"Every step seems to lead us further into the unknown, doesn't it?"

"I think the whole secret of Peatty and Eads hinges on just what happened between the time the Duvall rocket took off from Earth - - - and the time it returned to crash-land at White Sands."

"Which no one will ever know," Ann Luzanne concluded.

"It's not likely," Canfield agreed. "However, I intend to keep the spotlight moving around. Somewhere in the probe, I may pick up something - - - if the League doesn't get around to me, first. Anything I can learn about Gorken before we meet should help just that much."

"Only be careful, darling."

"It's his life or mine," Canfield answered. "I've no intention of kamikazing into the deal." He grinned. "Don't worry. This won't be a one-sided fight when it comes off."

THE DAYS followed in rapid exciting order, until a week had accumulated. Still, no communication came from Juano Picozzi. On the other hand, neither did any feelers or pressures that a person could trace to the League manifest themselves.

In spite of his confidence, Canfield began to worry. He considered means of getting in personal touch with the Ones. True, he could not build a chrono-control machine like Picozzi had constructed, nor did he boast any mutated powers.

But surely, there was some other way of bridging the centuries and establishing his own rapport with those unfathomable minds of the future. He might dispatch his own agents about the country, have them seek out mutants with known extra-dimensional skills and bring them to him. But the move - - - unless conducted with impossible-to-achieve secrecy - - - could only bring him reels of undesired publicity and stepped-up attention from the matriarchs.

It was plain that a hiatus existed.

However, progress for James Canfield and Ann Luzanne came much more swiftly in another direction. The barriers were down. Picozzi had made their roles known to each other. Gradually, each partner yielded to the other the small intimacies and personal knowledge that most lovers have already managed to achieve, long before they announce their desire to buro-mate.

Yet, one thing remained that Canfield could not yet bring himself to reveal. That was his former relationship with Marilyn.

Ann, on the other hand, brimmed over with information about herself as though she wished to unburden her whole past life. She recalled for Canfield many incidents of her early existence, from the time when as a child she had witnessed the dramatic street assassination of her mother.

She had been educated at the New School for Psychological Research in San Francisco, had later gone to college

at Berkeley. One of her earliest memories, she said, was being taken on the rocket to Honolulu and seeing the giant orchid farms, where plant wizards duplicated with flowers the miracles that the polyploid specialists accomplished with domestic animals. At seventeen, she had entertained a tremendous crush on a young space cadet who was killed in training six days before his graduation. At twenty, she had entered government service.

"That was how I first met Dr. Picozzi," she said. "Because of my job. I was in Montevideo where I was attached to the embassy. Juano came in one day to inquire about his status - - - he was a naturalized citizen revisiting the country of his birth, he said, and he wanted to make sure the States would let him back in. We talked, he took me to dinner, and I was enchanted by the logic of his views on the folly of having a matriarch government. I think he knew then I was the daughter of Eleanora and would volunteer for the Ones. But, I talked matters over with my grandfather first, before I made up my mind - - - "

"And who is your grandfather?" Canfield asked.

"*Was,*" she corrected. "He's dead now. Grandfather Custer agreed that the country was subject to influences ruining it - - - and if Picozzi had the right answer, I had no normal choice but to fall in with him - - - " Ann halted, smiled apologetically. " - - - oop, I'm sorry, darling. I was rattling on. My grandfather was Hiram Custer, the man who - - - "

" - - - founded one of the greatest fortunes in America," Canfield interrupted, suddenly. His body abruptly felt weak, unnerved. He tried to control the sudden rush of fear.

"You've heard of him, read of him, then. Wonderful! He was quite a recluse - - - so I'm surprised. But, he was a dear. When I was a child, I made him tell me a dozen times how he discovered the fabulous San Saba mine with robot prospectors - - - "

But, Canfield had stiffened. Alarm penetrated the marrow of his bones. He had almost forgotten the abyss that separated him and Ann, had in fact thought the gap was virtually bridged. But now, it had spread to a gulf of infinite width that threatened all their happiness

For the fact was, he too had known Hiram Custer. But an incredibly younger sprightlier Custer! They had been classmates at Old Harvard! Contemporaries in a past that must seem musty to Ann. And this lovely girl he was so free to hold in his arms - - - she was Hiram's granddaughter! She had known old Custer only as a loveable relic from another generation.

What, then, must she really think of him, James Canfield?

The answer stabbed in to him, lacerating his body with all the despair a man might feel on his first hearing the knell of doomsday. *She didn't know.* Cold utter clarity gripped Canfield's mind. Picozzi hadn't told Ann of the rejuvenation - - - and so far she hadn't guessed from Canfield's own reticent revelations about his former self. She thought him no older than his physical appearance proclaimed.

Suppose, suddenly, that she suspected his real age. How would she react? Canfield felt sure she would be repelled, disgusted - - - and somehow because of this certainty, life became more corrosive to his soul, less worthy of living.

In the space of seconds, acute depression had swept over him, erasing every light mood so that existence had gone totally flat.

ON THE beginning of the ninth day following Canfield's return to his headquarters, the plutonium-sized atomic pile on which he was figuratively seated reached fissionable mass and triggered

off.

That Ann Luzanne had sensed his change of mood, Canfield became well aware. He, himself, was filled with torment as he stood by, helpless to banish the *thing* which now lay between them - - - a thing which, for all he knew, might be only a phantasm in his own brain.

All during the research project on the Duvall expedition, Farson had been barred from the communications room in the big administration house. At Canfield's direction, Ann had supplied the majordomo with various conciliatory excuses, designed to avoid fanning his suspicion further although she knew it was already aroused. Both felt it would be useless to fire him. The matriarchs would react by stepping in to make *incommunicado* arrests all around, they reasoned.

At oh nine thirty, Ann, who had been feeding incoming telefax messages from the corporation's far-flung staff into the decoding robot since dawn, rushed into Canfield's personal office suite.

Her face was pale and her breath had noticeably accelerated. Fright stemmed in her eyes. A message, uncoded and transmitted through the normal public channels, had just arrived. It was addressed to Oliver Brown, Jackson Space Station.

Canfield took the printed comunication and read:

Report at once to Emma Cee.

G

"What does it mean, darling?" Ann asked at his side. Apprehension had reduced her voice to a choked whisper. "Have you any idea?"

Canfield rubbed his brow. "It doesn't build any fire in my brain," he answered. "But it's from Gorken all right - - - and offhand, I'd say it signals something important coming off. The unwary fly has just been invited to go visit the spider - - - but the big question is: where is the spider at?"

"Juano would know," said Ann.

"I'm sure of that. But where is Juano? This thing can't wait, Ann." Again, Canfield pressed his hands to his forehead. "The answer's probably buried inside my subconscious. Nothing I can do seems to bring it to the surface, however. Psych block in the works, evidently."

"Perhaps, you're up against a development or turn that Dr. Picozzi never foresaw," Ann suggested.

Canfield nodded. "It figures. I've got to get to him somehow - - - "

He stopped short, instantly tense. Ann Luzanne had suddenly gasped. Her eyes looked beyond him . . .

Canfield wheeled. He found himself facing Farson. A triumphant sneering Farson, this time - - - no longer the subservient fat man who managed the household but a dangerous potential assassin, poised light on his feet. His eyes blazed with suppressed hate. His right hand clutched a smooth-bor. nuclear pistol, which he held effectively trained on his two superiors.

The government spy could have entered only by using a duplicate key to the electronic lock on the suite. And since that key was the loops and whorls on the tip of Canfield's index finger, that could only mean that matriarch intelligence had registered the print patterns and duplicated them.

Now, Canfield understood why - - - after Yudkin's death - - - they had decided not to make a second attempt to kill Oliver Brown. The matriarchs had discovered *something* that interested them too much to want to destroy it. Brown's identity was under a cloud.

Farson snarled: "Don't destroy that visigram! Everything in this room is confiscated evidence - - - "

Canfield froze to immobility. He kept his face expressionless. "So the fat sloppy spy finally drops his masquerade - - - and turns out to be a matriarch toady," he taunted. "It might interest

you to know, Farson it's never been any secret. What made you decide to ring down the curtain?"

"You shut up, Brown!" the major-domo barked. "And get away from that desk. I'm arresting you in the name of the matriarch government!"

"On what charge?" Canfield demanded, calmly.

"Murder. The cold-blooded murder of a man named James Canfield - - - "

Canfield's wrist moved imperceptibly, even as his body continued to stand rigid as a statue. The needle-charge shot from the muzzle of the concealed Scorpion. It landed and spread through Farson's corpulent body. The fat man's jaws gaped open in sudden paralyzed surprise.

A second later, Canfield and Ann were grim unwilling witnesses to the dissolution of a human being. The surprised Farson had no time to grasp the fact of his death, before his body became a liquid thing, blurring and melting in shape. At the last moment, the distorted image of what had once been a man glowed incandescent; then, it vanished in a shower of golden atoms.

That's what I would have done to Marilyn, Canfield thought. *Low-charge death. Vicious and messy.* A slight uncontrollable shudder passed through his system.

Ann was shocked, needed his support. He helped her to a chair, where she sat down until the trembling left her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It *was* sudden, wasn't it?"

"Very sudden," Canfield assured. "Like a little war, all by itself."

"What can we do? What's our next move, now?"

"California, I say." Canfield's mind had shaken off its stunnedness. His intelligence was now racing at ram-jet velocity.

"Together?" Ann looked up at him, appealing with her eyes.

Canfield shook his head. "No. We'd better split up. Safer for you, Ann. Both of us'll alternate our travel. Plane, monorail, and plane again, switching several times - - - and buying new tickets each time we transfer. That'll slow the jokers up when they try to track us. All we need is to get to Juano in time, I believe."

"Where will we meet?"

"San Diego. In front of the giant news-flash screen, corner of Sixth and Broadway. I'll purchase a jetmobile there, pick you up exactly thirty-six hours from now. We'll drive up the Seaboard Freeway."

"Check," said Ann.

In ten minutes they were gone, temporarily abandoning the empire of the late Oliver Brown to the matriarchs.

THIRTY-SIX hours and thirty minutes from the moment they parted at Jackson Space Station, James Canfield and Ann Luzanne were speeding northward out of San Diego, through the swamped population centers of Del Mar, Oceanside, San Clemente. To avoid police traps, Canfield kept the sleek black jetmobile throttled down to the legal hundred-and-twenty limit. The Freeway carved a wide shining ribbon of light through the night-darkened landscape ahead of them.

Canfield had accomplished the devious flight to California without mishap. Ann, on the other hand, confessed to a bad scare in Phoenix. Local matriarch agents had suddenly launched a lightning swoop upon the monorail station. But it turned out they were looking for a deranged street robot which had run amok a few minutes before; hence, they ignored all the human travelers crowded into the spacious lobby.

"It appears, then," said Canfield, "that nobody's put out a visichannel reader on us, yet. Farson probably tried to stage a grandstand play of his own. He looked like a born glory-grabber."

"I believe you're right," said Ann.

"Anyhow, we've still got a few more hours of freedom. But if I know matriarch intelligence, they won't let too long go by without Farson reporting in - - - "

Now, the jetmobile had passed Santa Ana, one of the official government playspheres, was racing through Anaheim. Canfield had re-tuned his collarband receiver to police channels - - - his mind giving the broadcasts that peculiar split attention that adults of the twenty-first century had developed so fully. Upon reconsideration, he had decided not to jettison the small gadget - - - after all, it represented the last souvenir he had of his long past.

In a few moments, they were traversing the sprawled overgrown community of Los Angeles. They fought bewildering traffic as their speed reduced to an eighty-mile an hour crawl. The city flamed the night with lights that in places blotted out the starry sky.

Canfield found himself regretting he had not bought a copter or jet racer. For crowded as were the air traffic lanes in this city, the confusion still could not compare with the jams created along the surface arteries. But equally, Canfield had recognized the unwisdom of approaching Picozzi's home by air and landing near it, protected as the small shining cube undoubtedly was by safeguards and defenses.

Eventually, the city's northern outskirts dropped behind them and they passed suburban villages of plasto-concrete homes, alike as one dazzling white beehive is like any other.

Climbing higher into the mountains, Canfield finally turned the powerful jetmobile into the road that led to Juano Picozzi's hideout. The car twisted upward. Presently the cube broke into view, half-concealed by the overhanging lip of a brown hill. Parked less than fifty feet away from where they now halted, Canfield and Ann saw two vehicles: one, an aero taxi - - - the other, a light helicruiser.

"That's the cab in which Picozzi first brought me here," Canfield said. "The other job I don't recognize. Do you?"

Ann shook her head.

"You'd better wait here," Canfield told her. "I'll reconnoiter the area. I've got a feeling - - - "

"Juano never has company," Ann volunteered.

"That's what I thought."

Canfield hooked to his belt the small black metallic disc that Picozzi had given him in Miami. As he got out, his hand gripped the familiar Scorpion. He had previously inserted a re-charged clip.

THE MOON had risen a few minutes earlier and the surrounding terrain was brilliantly etched in silver light. Canfield moved forward until he came into contact with the invisible barrier. He switched on the force field nullifier. The air about him thickened at the next step - - - and he felt the familiar symptoms of nausea and pressure pounding at his ears.

Suddenly, he saw the outer door to Picozzi's cube slide open. Just beyond the entrance, he noticed the same wrenching darkness he had viewed before. Now, a figure materialized on the dimensional threshold, stepped out into the moonlight. A large hulking figure that Canfield already knew. Flug!

Canfield glanced to his right and left, looking for cover. Little natural shelter existed within the region of the barrier. In desperation, he lifted the Scorpion, aimed it at Flug's carelessly-exposed body. He squeezed. Nothing happened. Sweating, he applied more force to the trigger. But the charge would not fire.

At that moment, Flug's eyes - - - which had been sweeping the landscape - - - took notice of him. The big man wheeled. A para-gun appeared in his hands. Probably, it had been concealed inside his green shirt. He pointed the

weapon at Canfield and fired. But the same balk occurred. The stun-wave was blocked by the intervening force field, which dissipated its energies harmlessly.

To Canfield, it looked like a stalemate of weapons. Flug could not shoot into the barrier. He could not shoot out.

Flug suddenly began running toward Canfield. His body made a weaving pattern, like a fullback executing a broken field run. Strapped to his waist was a flat disc, somewhat similar in appearance to Canfield's nullifier. A moment later, it became clear that the object also was a field-reverser. For Flug crashed into the barrier and kept coming. His thick cretin like face was transformed into a demonic mask. His lips were drawn in a snarl. His small eyes gleamed.

Canfield measured his chances. He planned to sidestep his bellowing attacker at the climax of the latter's charge, then step inside with a solid jolting hook to Flug's jaw. But Flug, catlike for all his great bulk, veered at the last moment. The two crashed head-on.

The impact was too great for either man to maintain his balance But it was Canfield who gave way first. He fell to the unnaturally springy turf, his arms locked in a life-or-death hold with his enemy. Flug's monstrous weight quickly rolled on top of him. Both the big man's oppressive thumbs immediately forced their way to his eyeballs. Canfield's blinded optic nerves suddenly flashed and shrieked with pain. Vicious, tormenting pain. He flailed and kicked like a madman in an effort to get out from under the cruel punishment he was taking.

And suddenly he was free! Matter behaved differently in this strange half-world, it seemed, and the terrain under him had yielded, had flowed like a jelly-thick liquid. Instantly, he slipped out from under Flug's brutal hold. He bounded to his feet, wavering slightly like an acrobat making his debut on a tight rope.

As he stood up, his head pounded, the blood roared through his ears, and a sick dizziness made all his flesh tremble. His eyes cleared just in time to measure Flug's next bellowing charge at him.

This time, Canfield succeeded in averting it with inches to spare. Flug wheeled a second time, and the two grappled. But now, like wrestlers at the commencement of a match, neither shared an advantage over the other. Both men stood, legs braced apart, heads and shoulders bowed and locked, while their arms gripped and strained in a contest of pure strength. Whoever proved strongest would inevitably force the other to his knees and ultimate defeat - - - and each knew it.

Seconds passed, long as hours. Canfield felt renewed strength flow into his body, but not enough to give him an advantage. The two enemies remained engaged. Neither surrendered an inch, although the bone-crushing pressure that each built up on the other's rigid frame would have been intolerable to a man of normal stamina.

Then suddenly - - - as if a single thought had fissioned into twins and penetrated each brain within the same micro-second - - - both men twisted abruptly, snapped their arms free and plunged their clenching hands toward the other's disc shaped nullifier where it was hooked to his belt!

Immediately, Canfield blocked Flug's attack by gripping the big man's right wrist and slowly forcing his hand back. Simultaneously, he felt an equally powerful fist clamp down on his own forearm and stop its motion forward. The combat settled into another war of nerves and strength. Wrist against wrist! Biceps against biceps! Arm against arm!

Hundreds of years earlier, pioneers had settled their quarrels this way, Canfield recalled, his mind sheathed in that icy detachment men sometimes experience

when closest to death. Their primitive judges roped them together and gave them each a knife. Bystanders knew the strongest man would survive.

But that was not always so, he thought! Occasionally, it was the man with the strongest will to live who won to survival.

The body could summon unknown reservoirs of strength. That was the *psi* function of survival. Will to live.

Canfield struggled; he fought. His teeth clenched, uppers into lowers, ground through enamel to raw nerve in the aching desire of his muscles to keep on living. His heart became a jet-turbine that had swelled to bursting, that filled his entire frame, that rested on his crushed entrails and crowded the base of his brain with its throbbing.

And gradually, he found himself winning! Flug began to weaken. His blunt face mottled, grew livid with swollen veins. A rattling sound emerged from the big man's throat. Saliva drops flecked his exhaled breath.

At the crucial moment for Canfield, the two men's cheeks rubbed as if in embrace. Canfield shouted into Flug's scarred ear: "Flug! Have you forgotten Eads! Chill Eads!"

The sound of his real name, not spoken to him in years probably, stupefied the League henchman. His muscle-taut body weakened, seemed to sag like a pile of rope. A quiver rippled through him. The glaze on his eyeballs faded; deep-set intelligence glimmered through for just a moment. Flug's voice, altered in tone, screamed: "Eads is dead!"

"Try to remember!" Canfield persisted. "You're Eads, Flug! You spaced out on the Duvall ship!"

"That's wrong!" Flug's thick tones blurted. "Gorken killed us - - - killed us all. Then, he put me back in my body . . . and . . . "

Canfield's hand, freed for a moment from Flug's death-hold on the wrist, began to inch downward. The field-nullifier on the big man's belt was nearly within grasp.

"And what, Eads? Try to recall . . . "

"I - - - I had to get back inside my body, so I could help Gorken. He was helpless . . . not born yet . . . not alive until tomorrow came - - - "

"If I killed Gorken," suggested Canfield, infinite caution modulating his voice, "you'd be free, Eads . . . free to leave the League . . . to cast off the chains around your mind - - - "

Flug's thick moronic face suddenly darkened to its original state of rage. His lips twitched, his teeth protruded in a snarl. "I kill you, Oliver Brown - - - I kill, kill, kill - - - "

But, the big man's anger came too late. His renewed attack failed instantly and his body jerked, as if galvanized. "*Awurrggh* - - - - !"

Canfield's trigger reflexes had been swifter. His fingers had moved to Flug's nullifier switch, had pressed the knob forward to "Off" position.

Flug's painful scream immediately yielded to an inferno of sound a hundred times more deafening. The force field barrier had closed on his helpless body. The opposite sides of the field, grinding together like two shearing plates of transparent duro-steel, took only a micro-second to span the gap that the sudden materializing of Flug's body had created in its energy-potential flow. Gruesome death bore down instantly on the trapped victim. The insubstantial molecules of Flug's organic frame were crushed, obliterated, in the space of a heartbeat. The "thunderclap" transformed the atoms into a cloud of dust that was finer than any dust ever previously known on earth.

Canfield fell back, panting and sweating. Only the tremendous energy-sucking nature of the field had prevented heat reaction that would have baked him - - - the lone survivor - - - to death. His eyes searched out the scene, but no trace of Flug remained. Was this a de-

monstration of cosmic justice? *The mills of God,* he thought - - - this time without his previous sense of detachment, *do grind exceedingly small at that.*

STRENGTH flowed back into Canfield's exhausted body, recharging his muscles, restoring a normal beat to his heart. A minute passed and he felt able to go on. But as he emerged from the barrier on the inner side and hurried toward Picozzi's cubelike house, a dismal foreboding welled up in him. The para-gun that Flug had carried when he emerged from the entranceway had looked too much like Juano's own weapon.

On reaching the cube, he passed through the eyewrenching darkness of the doorway, experiencing the same baffling sense of spatial dislocation as formerly. He reentered a region of light to find himself in the familiar room of pastel walls and neo-glass ceiling where he and Picozzi had shared drinks and talk.

But now, the room's aspect had changed. Not subtly, but concrete evidence that great violence had taken place between the soft-hued walls. Almost at Canfield's feet lay a heap of wrecked machinery - - - glistening strewn wires, cogs, wheels, cams in a sickening array which told him he was looking at the demolished remains of a robot. Whether the automaton had belonged to Picozzi or had been brought along by Flug, Canfield could not determine; but that it would never again rate a "rebuild order" at any android factory was obvious. Canfield's eye roved on. No one sheds tears for dead mechanism.

The entire quarters was in a state of upheaval. Papers were scattered everywhere. Chairs, settees and other furniture had been wantonly destroyed and the wreckage tossed about. Whatever the intruder had been seeking, he had not given up hope very soon - - - for he had also gouged and blasted the floor and ceiling in a hasty search for hidden compartments.

Canfield moved on to the next room. His gaze instantly dropped to the body of a woman, which lay in a crumpled blood-spattered heap across a rug of wool-twisted skylon. Not particularly affected by the presence of death, yet impelled by curiosity, Canfield kneeled and gently turned the corpse over. He saw she had been a woman of about fifty, stylishly groomed, expensively dressed.

He remained a minute, studying her. Her hair, done up in modish curls, was an attractive steel-gray in shade. Her features looked familiar; something about the finely sculptured bone structure of her face made him sure he had seen her somewhere before.

But where? Possibly, she was only a face he had once glimpsed in a crowd, someone he had seen in a hotel lobby or waiting at a monorail station or seated at a table across the room in some cabaret. In fact, he could not even be certain - - - he realized with a shiver - - - whether she belonged to his past as Canfield or had been someone recorded in the superimposed memory of Brown.

Suddenly, the dead woman's features reformed into something familiar - - - as if Canfield had previously been forced to look at them through a lens that distorted their aspect and only now saw them in the shape of reality.

The features belonged to Marilyn! An older Marilyn, suddenly reverted to her original age upon the stopping of her life processes.

Canfield regarded her for a long minute, awed and shaken. Doubtlessly, this was how Marilyn had looked, prior to her first treatment by the League. How long ago it would have been since she made her compact with Gorken, Canfield could not guess. However, he was sure that Marilyn's true chronological age was undoubtedly much more than that now revealed. He wondered

who she had originally been. The chances were great that he would never learn.

He moved on, explored the other rooms. Then, he returned to the passageway which led through the dimensional junction to Picozzi's twice-hidden laboratory. He had found no trace of Juano in the remainder of the house. If he did come across him now, then a reasonable chance existed that the psychiatrist had escaped from the trap set for him.

Canfield plunged down the passageway, crossed over the threshold where a myriad angular dimensions beckoned and twisted in a mirror-distorted pattern. The abrupt dislocation assailed all his senses with vertigo. He had the feeling of stumbling blindly along the inner facets of a thousand-angled prism, a prism that was multi-dimensional in construction.

A moment later, he stepped out of a swirling hole created and maintained in pure space. He found himself between the shimmering walls of that laboratory where Picozzi had first contacted the Ones for him and transmitted their message.

But if the outer rooms of the cube had looked like a storm-center of destruction, their damage was far surpassed by the wreckage and havoc inflicted the sanctum. Only a heat-bomb could have created a more thorough demolition.

Heartsick, Canfield's gaze roved the room. Only the duo-lead shielded nuclear reactor remained intact, which probably accounted for the fact that power still flowed through the cube's conduits, maintaining the force-field barrier and the dimensional gateway.

Elsewhere, a scene of incredible destruction prevailed. The giant coils and omega transformers had been crushed to metal pulp; around them lay the smaller pieces of apparatus, thoroughly dismantled and ground to useless metal. Even the prong-studded helmet and wires of the chrono-communicator had been ruthlessly destroyed.

But there was no sign of Dr. Juano Picozzi.

Not at first, anyhow. Canfield began poking in the wreckage of the laboratory, hoping he might find at least some clue to what had happened. The strange wavering walls appeared more insubstantial than ever, as if they threatened collapse at any moment. He decided to search for a switch, hoping he might find a way of stepping up the power that stabilized the room

It was then, he came upon the body. A swelled bloated body, packed with corpulent dead white flesh. It resembled corpses that had been under water for weeks. The dead form lay in the rear corner of the laboratory, half-concealed by the splintered fragments of what had once been an acid-scarred shelf.

Canfield turned the body over. Instantly, an image came to his mind as he studied the features - - - a mental replica of a person he had never seen in his life Someone whose appearance he had conjured from description only. A lonely semi-schizoid mutant who had been incarcerated for numberless years in a Santa Barbara sanitarium.

John Pickens!

But what was Pickens doing here? Juano had spoken of the mutant as if he were dead, as if the secret of his communication with the Ones had been passed on to him barely in time.

But evidently, the unhappy gross creature had not died, however. Juano had given him refuge, retreat; probably, so he might be available should the chrono-communications equipment ever break down

And yet - - - and yet, there was something ghastly familiar about that face, as there had been something so hauntingly familiar about Marilyn's age-matured features. What was it?

The answer struck him like a thunderbolt - - - and Canfield recoiled in dazed

shock. The dead man was Juano Picozzi.

Juano Picozzi had been John Pickens!

THE PICTURE clarified. Clarified and blurred at the same time, as Canfield's still-bewildered mind sought to weigh and analyze the sudden revelation forced upon him. Death had once again stepped in, reversed the temporal pattern. Now, progress was blocked until a new causal frame could be established - - - and that hinged on factors that Canfield was not sure he could manage.

Which had Juano really been, the descendant of Uruguayan aristocracy as he claimed or the parentless mutant locked away to rot in his cell? Or both?

Canfield knew he might never find an answer. Perhaps the Ones had recreated Pickens in a brighter image to be their first tool - - - and his rigidly reshaped flesh had assumed its old form with the coming of rigor mortis. Perhaps, he had been educated in Montevideo like he maintained. At any rate, he had been a true friend and Canfield was deeply moved at losing him.

He scanned the destroyed laboratory for one final time. There seemed to be no point in lingering. Further contact with the Ones would be difficult to bring about without the equipment. In fact, at present it would be almost impossible - - - and the equipment could not very well be rebuilt from pulverized transistors, crushed coils, demolished flow-tubes. An impasse existed.

An impasse, thought Canfield, that could not be resolved by any other means except direct action. And action, itself, was meaningless when the enemy might be anywhere.

When the enemy might not even exist, in fact.

The truth flared in Canfield's brain like the flame of a solar prominence. Light chased out the darkness of doubt. Up to this moment, he had been floundering in a sea of mistaken concepts, his will bent to the control of another, a diseased mutant.

But now, he was safe on shore. He was freed from his phantasms.

There was no enemy.

He hurried from the laboratory, diving through the dimensional corridor that led him back to the living room of the cubelike house. He leaped over the dead robot and dashed for the outside, plunging recklessly into the area of silvered moonlight. At the barrier, he halted short. A flick of the knob on the force-field nullifier altered his molecular pattern. In the next minute, he was pushing through the thick transparent curtain to the sane world that lay beyond

Ann got out of the jetmobile just as he emerged on the far side. She rushed up to him. Her face showed the traces of worry-lines that had just now been erased by glad relief. Her cheeks - - - as he discovered when she surrendered to the welcome warmth of his arms - - - were tear-stained.

"I was afraid you were hurt - - - dead, maybe," she said. "I saw Flug come out and shoot at you. Then, the barrier fluctuated somehow - - - became visible, translucent so that everything behind it blurred - - - "

"Power foul-up," Canfield explained. "Everything's wrecked inside the place - - - "

" - - - when the barrier returned to normal, neither you nor Flug was in sight. I had no idea what had happened . . . "

"I killed him."

"Oh."

"I was just lucky - - - lucky as I was with Skink." Canfield tightened his embrace. Ann's small shoulders were trembling. "I went on inside, Ann. It wasn't pretty - - - "

"J - - - Juano?"

"Bad news, Ann. Brace yourself. He's dead "

Her body shook convulsively. Canfield held her tight until the paroxysm of grief subsided. Finally, she said: "What, now?" Her voice was flat, shorn of all hope.

"Nothing. It's all over."

"What do you mean?" She shot him a quick, unbelieving glance.

"I mean, we've been deluded. There is no Gorken. There never was a thing called Gorken."

Ann looked up at him. Her green eyes mirrored strange wonderment - - - and fear.

NEITHER SPOKE to the other for the space of an entire minute. Finally, Ann said: "I must go see what happened in there. I must know for myself."

"No Ann."

"I've got to, James. Oh, God, what's happened to you?"

"Nothing - - - Ann, I insist that you don't go. There's nothing more we can learn - - - "

Ann twisted suddenly in his grasp, turned and slapped him hard across the cheek. Her eyes brimmed anew with tears. Her full lips had compressed to a thin tight line, hurt, angered, frustrated. She said: "Gorken's done something to you. I don't know how or when, but he's blotted your mind . . . oh, darling, you've got to shake it off - - - "

Her small hands showered his cheeks with stinging slaps. Canfield blinked. Her behavior was incomprehensible to him. After all, the matter was settled, the chase ended.

Suddenly, Ann broke away from him. She ran toward the barrier. There, she fumbled with something at her waist - - - a force-field nullifier. Her body altered, became a shapeless glimmering shadow in the pale light.

A moment later, she was struggling through the field. Canfield promptly rushed to follow her. But swift as his normal movements were, the passage through the barrier slowed him down so much that he did not catch up with her until both were safely inside the cube.

He came upon her in the room where Marilyn's body lay. She was standing away from it, breathless. Their eyes met briefly; then Ann's vision strayed down to the corpse.

"I remember her, now," she said. "She's one of the retreads"

"She was my wife," Canfield informed her, quietly.

Ann turned. Shock was mirrored in her face. "But, you - - - James - - - you must have known - - - "

He shook his head. "No, I didn't know," he said, slowly. "Nor do I have any right to judge. I was one, too. I took the operation . . . " He halted, tried to go on. But he could not bring himself to finish.

For Ann, it took a moment for recognition of what he meant to soak in. She stared at him with disbelief.

Finally, she said: "Then, how old are you . . . really - - - ?"

Canfield told her.

She did not go to pieces all at once. In fact, at first she controlled her hysteric reaction fairly well. She said: "And to think, all the time I was fighting them - - - fighting the League because I thought it was evil that some men should cheat death forever. That they should feast on their fellows - - - "

"Then, you never dreamed that I - - - "

"No. How could I? Juano never told me much about you. He only said the Ones had directed he find what he called - - - jokingly - - - an executioner. He said that when the time came, he would reveal the other agent to me. At the Radiation Hospital, when I found out it was you, darling, I was happy, surprised . . . "

"Isn't it all right, now?" Canfield pleaded. "Now that we know there never was a Gorken."

"No, James - - - !"

"He was a myth. Flug and Skink are dead. We can go back to our old life now. We can become ourselves. The League will die now . . . will wither on the vine . . . "

"And you can enjoy your longevity?" Ann returned coldly.

Canfield shook her, savagely. "Look here. Do you think I asked for it? Do you think I wanted something so bad I'd sell the human race for it? Don't you understand? Juano arranged it. Juano Picozzi - - - yes, the same Juano who used to be John Pickens, the crazy mutant - - - "

"You don't know what you're saying," said Ann. "I've shocked you. I've hurt you - - - "

"Picozzi did it," Canfield raved on. "Picozzi, who in his insane dreams, believed he could talk to the twenty-third century - - - he was the one who made Flug and Skink rejuvenate me. Me, Oliver Brown. It was Flug and Skink - - - yes, the same ones who used to be Chill Eads and Ed Peatty - - - who discovered the secret of life and sold it - - - "

But, Ann Luzanne waited to hear no more. Surrendering to complete hysteria, she broke loose from Canfield and rushed out of the room, out of the house. Stunned, Canfield started to follow her - - - only to discover that his nullifier was missing from his belt. Ann had snatched it away.

By the time he ransacked the wrecked quarters and found a spare disc that he could use, his opportunity to overtake the girl had drained away. Ann was already through the barrier and climbing into the light helicruiser that had been parked next to the aero-taxi when they drove up.

Seconds later, the trim ship soared aloft on full-power blades and vanished against the velvet sky.

ALTHOUGH Picozzi's aero-taxi still remained available, Canfield decided against using it. Undoubtedly, the helicruiser was faster - - - and Ann had grabbed a good head start, to boot.

Emerging from the barrier, he climbed into the jetmobile and started down the torturous mountain road that led back to the city. Time enough to catch up with Ann later, he thought. After all, he was Oliver Brown, wasn't he? - - - a man with hidden resources few others dreamed of.

He wondered why he hadn't been able to make Ann understand about Gorken. Gorken was a chimera, a creation of several deluded imaginations pooled together. All the people involved in this insane affair had been deluded: Ann Luzanne, Juano Picozzi, Flug, Skink, even the other members of the League.

Only he - - - Oliver Brown - - - was free.

Now, Canfield had reached the junction of the small road with the southbound speedway. He turned into it and soon was surface-jetting toward the metropolis at a hundred and fifty miles an hour.

His mind rambled from one thought to another. Funny, wasn't it, the curious hallucinations men use to delude their rational brains? Take himself, for example. Why had he thought - - - just because the League had given him a few extra years of life - - - that he had once existed as a nearly-senile philosophy professor at some eastern school. Which one? Where? Oh - - - damn it, now it came to him - - - New Harvard.

Hell, he had grown up in Granite City, Illinois. A man doesn't forget his early life that easily, he doesn't. In fact, he could remember the first time Flug had approached him. Back in those days, old Flug had come out in the world a sight more often. The League was still rounding up members, that was why. It took five million credits to make the grade - - - unless, of course, you had something special on the ball

Well, the League had sold him the

best bill of goods a self-made millionaire ever bought. The only drawback was you had to change your name from time to time. But that was a snap when you had a few million spare credits salted away. Take that time he spaced out to Luna - - - what a ride that had been! Worth every nickel he paid for it - - - and don't think moon travel hadn't come high in those days of rocket exploration!

Funny all those faked visigrams he used to receive. All that trouble to learn Draconian, too. The League had had a lot of screwball ideas, but after all - - - maybe you needed them to keep the members in line. Especially the latecomers, who hadn't gotten rich until after the matriarchs took over the government. You really had to persuade them hard that the League could do ever better when it took over the country. First the country, Flug and Skink had told them - - - and then, the world. And maybe the planets, too, if space ships ever got that far.

He'd have to put some snoopers to work in the morning, Canfield told himself - - - have them run down Ann and bring her to him. He'd straighten out this fixation of hers about somebody named Gorken pretty quick, don't think he wouldn't. Then, they could get back to Jackson Space Station and start straightening out the mess they'd gotten into, needle-charging that government spy. Farson had it coming to him, though; no doubt of that. Well, it'd be damned nice to get back in the saddle of the empire he'd built with his own hands. Oliver Brown was still a power in this country, he'd let them know - - -

The speedway junctioned and split into three forks, as it came out of the lower end of the valley. Canfield veered to the left, took the expressway that rolled into Strip Town a few miles further south.

Canfield clocked his time in getting down to the city, decided he'd better throttle back now that he was in the virtual heart of the metropolis. We got moving sidewalks now, he thought. Wonder when we'll get moving roads. Not ever, probably. Too impracticable - - - yet it'd sure save wear and tear on the driver. Next time, it was going to be copters for him, he swore. No more of this poky surface for him. What could he have been thinking of to fool around with a jetcar in the first place?

FIVE MINUTES later, Canfield pulled up in the arched roadway that channeled side traffic off sixteen-lane Sunset Boulevard and up to the first subterranean level of the Hotel Betelgeuse

Exactly five minutes after that, he had garaged the sleek jetmobile and presented himself at the room desk. He was given his old suite.

It still lacked a few hours of being dawn, when he let himself inside his prize apartment. He strode through the luxurious suite to the terrace, where he looked out over the fantastic lights of the pleasure blocks. He could immediately recall a half dozen clubs who would welcome Oliver Brown tonight.

But somehow, he was tired, drowsy. Too much excitement in the past twenty-four hours. He couldn't seem to recall everything he had done, but he was sure he'd really been in a rat-race somewhere. Funny, he didn't remember drinking anything with a kicker in it, either.

He stepped back off the terrace and reentered the apartment.

Ann's voice, restrained but deadly, suddenly spoke in his ear from behind: "Darling, don't move!"

"Ann!" he protested.

A metal snout prodded in his back. Ann said: "Please. Keep quiet - - - whatever you do. You're not yourself, James. You've become a *control*. But if you try to raise an alarm, I shall have to kill you - - - "

Canfield sensed the deadly urgency in her voice and responded by freezing. Ann's young hands went swiftly over him, removed the Scorpion. She said: "Turn around - - - but, slowly."

He turned and faced her. "I don't understand this," he told her. Genuine puzzlement marked his words. "You're acting insane, Ann. Don't you remember? I'm Oliver Brown. I'm the man you're going to buro-mate."

"*You* are James Canfield," she answered, trying to maintain her voice at a cool business-like level. She fought back new tears. "You're the only man on Earth who can kill Gorken. But first, I've got to get you away from his influence. Somewhere inside Picozzi's house, Flug must have planted a hypno-bomb. You triggered it - - - and promptly your mind could no longer believe in the reality of Gorken - - - "

"Listen to me, Ann - - - !" Canfield protested.

She swept on. "What's more, you also seem to suffer a variety of overtone effects from the explosion - - - for one thing, you've apparently come to believe you're actually Oliver Brown. If I turned you loose, you'd walk straight into the first League trap set for you - - - "

"For the love of God, Ann, talk sense to me!"

"Oh, what's the use?" The girl returned. She raised her arm. Canfield saw her hand supported a para-gun. In the next fraction of a second, she must have sprayed him with a low charge - - - for a stinging paralysis swept over his body. His muscles became as sluggish as if they supported a load of ten gravities. Only his efferent impulse functions and the involuntary motor activity of his system seemed to be completely unaffected by the beam's reduced strength.

He found he was still able to speak, however. But his speech was muddy and halting.

Following Ann with his eyes, he saw she was on the verge of physical collapse. Somehow, steel will alone sustained her. "What are you going to do with me?" he asked.

"Take you out of the country," she replied. "You're as helpless now *with me* - - - as you would be anywhere else in the world, without me. G certainly mickey finned your mind, I must say. But the Ones'll get to us somehow - - - get us out of this jam - - - I know they will."

"There are no Ones," said Canfield. "Picozzi imagined them."

"Did he also imagine you into a young man worth more millions than you can ever possibly count? You've got to talk this thing out with me. I'm sorry, I went off my rocker about your having been through the clinic. You have every right to be as old as you are - - - and I was a silly emotional squirt to take on so. I love you, darling. Do you hear that? I love you - - - and what you are now is all that matters to me. Now, then," Ann said, running out of breath, "tell me how Juano was killed."

Canfield decided he would have to humor her aberration, if he hoped to live. He could see no harm, however, in presenting the unvarnished truth. He described how he had found Picozzi's body and how he had discovered that after death, the cells of that body had reverted to their original mutated state - - - making Picozzi again into the grossly corpulent John Pickens he had once been.

"But don't you see?" said Ann. "That proves the existence of the Ones. In return for his becoming their agent, the Ones gave Juano a new lease on normal life. Just as they gave you a new lease on time - - - "

"Nuts," said Canfield. "The guy blew his lid years ago, I tell you."

"How can I convince you? Your mind isn't your own." Ann sighed. "But don't think I'm giving you up as hopeless. We're checking out, immediately. May-

be, the atmosphere on Luna will clear your head. Not even the matriarchs can lay a hand on us there . . . "

DEEP SPACE, empty and yawning, cold as all eternity, lay about them. The black void, diademed with glittering frosty stars in a brilliance never seen on Terra, contrasted sharply with the violet reaches of the upper stratosphere.

James Canfield was seated next to an unshuttered port. He watched the slow unmeasurable progress of the ship across the stars without awe, firmly convinced that as Oliver Brown he had made the passage before. Ann Luzanne sat at his side, far more tense than he, more conscious of the great gamble she had taken, of the great stakes that remained to be won.

The couple had departed from San Bernardino Spaceport at dawn. Luck had enabled them to pick up a pair of late cancellations when they arrived at Satellite VI, one of the artificial spheroids that circled the Earth as a transfer point on the lunar voyage. Since there was no known way of medically predicting who would be susceptible to "space fear," the only test was the *test*, itself. That was what had caused the cancel-outs. On the first lap, two would-be tourists with priorities had come down with that peculiar combination of bathophobia, nyctophobia and agoraphobia which would fibrillate their heart muscles if they were allowed to continue the trip. It was their tickets which Ann and Canfield had inherited on reaching the first-stage satellite.

Now, the giant vessel had reached its "turnover" area, where Earth gravity yielded to that of the moon. New coordinates had to be plotted by the banks of pilot computers, as the ship began its fall toward the nearly-dead world above it.

And to port observers, there again occurred that peculiar phenomenon when directions seem to reverse themselves and "up" suddenly becomes "down." The pilot crew, of course, would brake the descent long before the dried-up seas of Luna's near side would loom large enough to blot out half the sky. Then, passengers would transfer to one of the landing satellites that rotated above the smaller world.

Once aboard the huge space liner, Ann had lightened the para-charge so that Canfield could move about with fair ease and talk at normal pace. But, his mind showed no signs of recovering its normal personality.

In the privacy of their pressure compartment, Ann kept after him hammer and tongs. The slow monotonous hours of the trip dragged by. Gradually, Ann's lovely face began to reflect the despair she felt inside. And more and more, the original "Canfield" side of her companion's mind retreated into darkness. He had already forgotten the incident outside Picozzi's cube when he had told her his real age, she discovered with horror. The suppression was almost complete.

She tried every trick of psychology at her command At first, it occurred to her that the shock of her reaction to his truthfulness about his years had driven him into this withdrawal. She had not realized how much she had loved him, until she saw how much her own deeply-regretted words - - - delivered in the hysteria brought on by Juano's death - - - had destroyed the fabric of his confidence.

She should have known, she thought, that the Ones would have to combine the judgment of age with the resil ency of youth in a man, if they hoped to forge a tool capable of going up against Gorken.

No, Canfield's condition of retreat had deeper causes. She had no idea how far into the higher control centers of his brain the hypno-bomb might have penetrated. If she only knew, she could

gauge the extent of its influence. It would be a catastrophe if Canfield went on to the end of his natural life, believing he was Brown.

THE LINER approached the orbit of the landing satellites. Forward impulses, delivered to the aft tubes, accelerated the big ship along a tightly-astrogated course. Shortly afterward, the vessel docked on the rim of a huge man-made spheroid. The passengers marched through air-tunnels to the space community housed along the inner corridors.

The tension had departed from Canfield's own face. He was now mentally adjusted to the para-effects of the beam Ann held constantly trained on him. He had grown to look upon his predicament with detached interest. When he got the jump on Ann and this cock-eyed episode was settled, he'd see she had the best psychiatric treatment the twenty-first century could muster.

He chuckled. Ann's present aberration was really a corker.

Together, they strolled through the satellite. They looked at the high-priced luxury merchandise in the shops. They had a highball together in the passenger restaurant.

Then, intercom speakers announced the imminent departure of the lunar landing craft on which they were booked. They ran across the metal-welded floor of the great central waiting room and boarded the small ship with seconds to spare.

THE LUNAR ROCKET landed first at the military base near Tycho, Crater 16, then crossed the twilight zone and trailed a streak of fire over the pole before it dropped down to skim the valleys on the far side.

Here, it came to a permanent stop on the spacedrome of Millikan City, the largest city on Luna and the only community that was not completely domed over.

As Canfield and Ann rode from the drome to the heart of the city by wheel-tracked surface limousine, Canfield suddenly told her: "I've been here, before. Those mountains to the south, I've climbed there."

"If you still think you're Oliver Brown, you've been here all right," Ann returned. Her tone was more acid than she intended "Brown used to talk at great lengths about his moon explorations. Seemed to think it proved something I could never figure what - - - " She paused, nearly choked, " - - - unless - - - "

"Unless what?"

"Didn't the Duvall expedition land around here somewhere?"

"On the present site of Millikan City," Canfield told her.

"That's what I thought. Maybe, Brown was interested in the flight before you were, darling - - - "

"Stop talking about me like I were two people."

"You are. You're Jekyll-Hyde merged, Siamese twins in one body."

"Look Ann," said Canfield. "I can enjoy a joke as well as anyone - - - even an expensive joke. But, I don't understand what we're doing on Luna. Not that I don't relish a vacation, but - - - "

"Try to remember," said Ann. She placed her hands on his temples and forced his gaze to meet her own. "Why did Brown come to the moon? Was it because the Duvall ship landed here? Did something happen to Eads and Peatty, something that didn't happen to the others - - - ? Was Brown trying to find out just what that certain *something* was?"

"I'm trying to," Canfield replied. But the tone of his voice indicated that all he had in mind was to placate his companion and humor her strange behavior.

The limousine bounced down the last few hundred feet of rocky terrain and

entered the limits of the moon city. The air was not quite as thin and bracing as it had been on the plateau, but it was equally as chilly. The community could have been dropped inside any terrestrial metropolis and even the tax assessors would have had a hard time locating it - - - it was that small. Canfield counted less than twenty blocks of uninspired plasto-concrete buildings.

"Well, this is it, folks," said their cheerful driver, a seamed veteran of Luna's fortnightly days and nights. "Biggest little city on the moon, we call it."

"Is it always this cold?" Ann asked, hugging her arms.

"Colder," said the driver. "We're in *changeover* right now - - only time a fellow's really comfortable. Tomorrow, the sun comes up - - - and from then on we bake."

"That's great," Ann replied, mournfully.

Canfield pointed a finger to the south. "I've climbed those mountains," he said. "Last time I was here."

"Hmmph," said the driver. "Not those mountains. They ain't climbable." He squinted an eye. "Not unless you got iron lungs - - - and a poor hankering for oxygen."

"See?" said Ann.

"You folks honeymoonin'?" the driver asked. "Lots of newly-buromated couples space up here. Guess they hope the old girl'll be as romantic on the surface as she looks a quarter million miles off."

"How disappointed they must be."

"Course it's all the way you look at the place," the driver returned, shrugging. "Take me - - - if I'd make a uranium strike on her, I'd hug her and call her the most romantic old planet in the system. Well, here's the hotel. The best diggin's old M. C. can offer - - - - "

M. C.!

A cloud lifted from Canfield's brain. His two sets of memories merged, his double-mind integrated all the facts suddenly made clear to him. By a massive effort of will, he shook off the pressuring blow to his control cells that the hypno-bomb had inflicted. The full, final and ultimate truth could no longer be withheld from him: *Gorken did exist!*

In fact, Gorken lurked here within reach of him. Here at M. C. At Emma Cee! Milliken City! He didn't know to which he owed his luck - - - the millionth probability offered by chance or the far-sighted chrono-maneuvering of the Ones. But whichever had brought it about, he was now arrived - - - ready to face his ultimate rendezvous.

Now, Canfield recalled a certain incident he had noted when he was in the council chamber of the League at Denver. How the answers had been delayed three seconds, during the question-and-answer session. Three seconds for radio to carry across space to Luna and back.

He remembered how in that other time-track, the one that was now ineradically altered, Marilyn had spaced up to Millikan City and wandered into the mountains where she met her death. Death at the personal hands of Gorken for dereliction in duty, without a doubt!

Joy seized him. The Ones had not failed him, after all. How well they had known this moment would arrive and had prepared him for it! This hour was the ideal moment to strike. G fancied himself secure, Canfield realized. His defenses were rebuilt, his mental blocs once more firmly in place. Missing were only Flug and Skink. But they had merely been the pawns G had sacrificed in this last gambit to preserve himself and his League from destruction. All to no avail, thought Canfield. The defenses of the master player were no longer as impregnable as he supposed.

Ann Luzanne suddenly clutched his arm. "James - - - darling - - - what's come over you? What is it? You're re-

membering now, aren't you? Tell me! You've got the answer, haven't you. I can see it in your eyes - - - you've awakened - - - oh, tell me, tell me!"

But Canfield had already left her. Without warning, without apparent reason, he had broken away and begun walking as rapidly as he could - - - walking away from the hotel and down the first narrow paved avenue that led out of Millikan City to the steep-sloped peaks beyond.

His stride was so rapid that his legs blurred in the thin Lunar air. It seemed almost as if he paced his steps away from the city with the grim determination of an avenging robot. He gazed neither to the right nor the left.

To Ann, who watched astonished, it seemed impossible that mere flesh and blood could keep up such an exhausting rate of travel. Yet, Canfield plodded on, never once losing the rapid mechanical rhythm of his stride. Ahead of him, the terrain now roughed and led upward, past crags and boulders, into an area where no mechanical vehicle could follow.

Presently, he had left the city far below. After hours of steady climbing, he had reached a desolate rock-studded region where the ground under his boots was carpeted with a thick green mold, slimy and poisonous in appearance.

How many countless ages had this moisture-hungry form of life dominated the moon's barren landscape, gnawing sustenance out of the rock itself, never allowing a rival form to develop wherever it might flourish? No one knew. But the total geological time *could* amount to a thousand million years.

Canfield's body began to chill. His starved lungs ached for oxygen. Several times he stumbled and fell, cutting and bruising himself on the sharp outcroppings. One time when he dropped, his hands fumbled against the slimy green mold; promptly they began to sting as if acid had burned them. Doubts that he should go further almost weakened his will, as he recalled his last trip up into this mountainous area. He corrected himself - - - Oliver Brown's last trip. Brown had seen to it first that he was properly clothed, equipped with oxygen mask and tablets, food and water, and accompanied by a robot bearer. But even then, the millionaire had nearly died of exposure.

The consciousness of what failure would mean drove Canfield on. Though the long night persisted, he never once lost his directions. The landmarks guiding him to his destination had been indelibly etched into his brain. Toward the end of this last high defile, he knew he would come across steps that had been carved into a precipice of pure granite. All he had to do was climb them, for that was where he would find the cave - - - halfway up to the top of that ancient carved stairway. The *same* cave where many years ago, Eads and Peatty - - - exploring the terrain by foot after the Duvall ship had been temporarily disabled on the peak above - - - had stumbled across the body of Gorken, sealed away in his shimmering out-of-phase period.

Canfield's arms and legs were heavy as stone. They felt more paralyzed now than they ever had under the para beam from Ann Luzanne's gun. He recognized his difficulty as a symptom of his extreme fatigue.

Simultaneously, a throbbing headache threatened to dynamite his brain from his skull. This was the point in the atmosphere where the slightest physical exertion robbed a man of all breath, of all strength. But to stand still was to die.

Canfield's face had already turned blue. His eyes, now deep-sunk in their sockets, were bewildering him with double-images. His body was bone-dry. He would willingly have killed himself for a drink of water.

Still, he trudged onward and upward,

his pace reduced by exhaustion to a walk.

Then suddenly, out of the thin atmosphere ahead of him where the scene was distorted by the shadowless night, his tired vision finally made out the series of grim broad steps that scaled the cliff above to another hundred feet.

Few human beings had looked on this place of solitary grandeur, Canfield thought. Only gods - - - or men like gods - - - could traverse such a tortuous landscape in impunity. He shivered. The bare scene was deathly still, shorn of all suggestion of life. No wind existed in this place, either - - - although twenty-four hours later, when the sun raised its molten rim above the cracked horizon, winds of hurricane velocity would hurl against the cliff face.

Wearily, Canfield began to mount the ancient stairway. He wondered about the race that had chiseled it from the rock. Where had they come from - - - Venus, Mars? Perhaps farther? Some planet outside the system, or even possibly, outside the galaxy? It didn't matter. Whoever they had been, wherever they had come from, they had landed on Luna for one purpose, only. That was to carve out the crypt in which they laid Gorken.

What a grim majestic scene that must have been - - - sealing up Gorken, who had been as alien a thing to that age-old race as he was now to the people of Terra. A thing that had fallen into their midst, panicking them into a feat of superhuman proportions in their anxiety to rid themselves of him. A *thing* that had been cast out of its original dimension by still another race of undreamed-of remoteness and antiquity - - - to be for almost infinite centuries, a helpless creature that was completely out-of-phase with every other atom in the entire cosmos.

NOW, CANFIELD had reached the opening of the cave. Boldly, he plunged in. Here, he found the physical part of his ordeal slackened somewhat. The air proved thicker and not quite so chilling inside. Evidently, the interior was still warmed by some thermal draft from the fires in the planet's bowels.

Suddenly, he halted, unable to move. Dread tingled every fiber of his being, plucked at his heart. Gorken was awake!

He fought down rising panic. Where was the help the Ones had promised? What kind of death would Gorken try to inflict on him for this unprecedented violation of his sanctuary? For this intrusion into a realm where even such slaves as Flug and Skink had come but seldom?

Canfield commenced moving forward again. But as he did, he found suddenly that a new psych bloc had set itself up in his mind. *He could not visualize Gorken's appearance.* Although Brown's memory told him he had once seen the master of the League face to face, the eidetic pattern refused to recirculate in his brain.

Instead, all that slithered through his imagination was the ordinary picture you would expect of such a thing of composite evil: a foul obscene monster that dripped with nauseating poison at every pore, a thing of scales and tentacles and whiplike appendages.

Yet, the Ones had said he was human in shape.

New strength suddenly flowed through Canfield's body, warming his flesh, priming his muscles, exhilarating his heart. The strength was like an electric current that was generated through contact with some outside source of energy. He felt as if a two-way circuit had been established between himself and minds of inconceivable resources.

Instantly, he realized what had happened. The moment he had thought of the Ones, their superior mentality had plunged through the three-century temporal gap and taken over direct control of his brain. It was impossible to con-

ceive the total amount of dimension-warping power required to maintain the tenuous contact without aid of machinery.

Canfield took another step forward, then another. The cave broadened, became a vaulted chamber illuminated with phosphorescent light from the rock-seamed walls.

Caution prompted him to proceed more slowly. He flattened himself against the wall. Instinct told him the awakened Gorken was now aware of his presence. Aware but not yet alarmed, confident of victory.

At that instant, Gorken chose to speak. Bleak as outer space, his cold inhuman voice traveled across the room to hurl one soul-blasting phrase in Draconian at Canfield: *"Droischkelgortz!"*

CANFIELD'S indoctrinated mind instantly translated the phrase. Then, it recoiled at the myriad vistas of horror the threat conjured for him under Gorken's vengeful ingenuity. His brain reeled. Desperately, he wanted to flee from this place of madness, run at top-speed to Millikan City and charter the first ship to Earth. The strength supplied him by the Ones ebbed under the impact of Gorken's fierce mental attack.

A door of shining metal materialized in the wall of crumbling rock directly ahead of him - - - the wall that blocked off the far end of the chamber. It was here that Gorken's voice had emanated.

The shining door slowly swung open, actuated by hidden machinery that - - - unbelievably - - - either had to operate inside solid rock or was manipulated through a higher dimension. Canfield then saw that the cave actually shielded a great locked vault. Part of his memory told him it had been constructed eons previously by the same race that had brought Gorken's time-frozen body to Luna. And now Gorken, in-phase, was emerging from his vault - - - at last to meet his willful enemy face to face!

Canfield needed more strength - - - and the Ones supplied it to him. It flowed into every crevass of his body, reenergizing the nucleus of every cell, reorganizing the defenses of his blood and bones and muscle. His brain cleared into a cold-functioning computer, divested entirely of emotional drawbacks. All his mental power was immediately channeled into one supreme force, shaped and aimed to destroy the monster in front of him.

Then, Gorken emerged into view.

Canfield almost broke under the blow to his senses that this first sight of his opponent created. He stared, transfixed. Nothing could have possibly prepared him for such a tremendous impact . . .

Before him appeared a creature of superhuman physical beauty, a godlike man created in the image of beings as superior to Canfield's race as his own race was to the apes that preceded it!

No one feature of Gorken's shining chiseled face could be made out in exact detail; the entire austere countenance shimmered, bathed by a glowing inward light that spun a blinding halo about the head and shoulders. He stood taller than Canfield. His limbs were white as marble, gracefully muscled yet expressive of enormous strength. He moved forward slowly, with the ponderous step of a great radiation-bathed statue come into life of its own. His high-domed brow frowned in majestic anger.

The weapon! Remember the weapon, Canfield!

Nearly destroyed by the backlash of mental forces in the chamber, a telepathic voice manifested itself inside Canfield's brain. *The weapon! Use the weapon!* The voice grew fainter, weakened by transmission over a barrier of three hundred years.

Suddenly, Canfield felt the hypnotic fog lift from every section of his mind. The damper which the Ones had placed on his memory in order to protect the

location of the weapon was instantly erased. And he remembered! His fingers moved swiftly to the minature receptor he had worn close to his throat during all the past months. He removed the set-screw that held the back plate of the collarband radio in place. Inside, his fingers clamped tight on a small object.

Without bringing the object out to view, Canfield *knew* exactly what it would be. The translucent jewel, glittering with pin-point light, that Picozzi had held in his palm while they talked in Miami!

A picture of the circuit formed in Canfield's mind. Hair-like wires connected with junction transistors, feeding next to an intricate oscillation sequence that could completely alter the phase-resonance of matter close to it. One flick of the tiny knob on the jewel's top facet - - - and as far as the individual was concerned, he would have the whole continuum exactly one full day behind.

Without hesitation, Canfield flicked.

Immediately, he was conscious of a change in his environment. Gorken still stood before him, but altered - - - radically altered! His body had become a pillar of fire, a column of light that was shimmering and dissolving into atoms. But only for a moment. Then, the fire reversed itself. Gradually, the body began to solidify.

The telepathic voice in Canfield's brain doubled its urging: *Fire Canfield! Fire the weapon! Now!*

He understood with instant perception what had happened. The jewel had transported him twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes into the future. This column of fire before him represented a dying Gorken. A Gorken he had already slain.

But Gorken's body was not completely synchronous with the space-time universe of Canfield and though he had been slain, there still existed for him a five-minute reprieve - - - when the atoms of his body would oscillate back through the twenty-four hour sequence. If during this phase, he could prevent Canfield from blasting him in the future - - - then the entire causal sequence would be erased.

It was now or never, Canfield realized. Recognition of what he must do geared him into instant action.

His fingers explored the foreplate of the collarband radio, slid back the dial and found under it the second part of the hidden weapon - - - the bore and trigger of an elaborately-fashioned mini-blaster. A mini-blaster loaded with a nuclear charge.

Now, the burning form of Gorken had achieved a complete recreation. Exactly as if he had never died. The awful inhuman features came to life. Slowly, they swept the scene, until at last they fell in majestic scorn upon Canfield. The latter's frantic movements were bent entirely on assembling the tiny weapon and bringing it to aim.

Again, Gorken uttered his primal curse in chilled rolling tones: *"Droischlelgortz!"*

But Canfield had finished the assembly. He wheeled, fired.

Gorken screamed once. Then suddenly, where his body had been, there stood only a blackened clump - - - from which trailed a few red sparks. It resembled the shimmering pillar of fire Canfield had first seen only in its general shape and size. And nothing about the mound suggested that its charred atoms had once been marble-limbed flesh - - - flesh of a nature alien not only to the soil of Luna or any of the other worlds of the galaxy, but also to the entire length and breadth of the universe.

Shaken and sick, Canfield turned away. He started to walk out of the chamber. But at the far end of the tunnel, where the cave opened to the face of the cliff, he saw that a bright circle of daylight now rimed the exit. Change-over had come and gone. He was

nearly twenty-four hours ahead of the rest of mankind - - - and the sun had already lifted above the lunar horizon.

Canfield decided he had no desire to remain out of resonance with the world he knew and loved. He reached inside the set, flicked the knob on the jewel back to its original position. Promptly, he found himself transported back to the place in time where he belonged.

The chamber to which he returned now glowed with radiant light, Canfield discovered. The flood of brilliance stemmed from the burning pillar that had been Gorken. It stood anew in the rockwalled room, a column of fire that would remain incandescent for twenty-four hours - - - until the battle that brought Gorken's final destruction was enacted *or* was reenacted, however a person wished to regard it.

Canfield found that he did not wish to think of it, at all. His task was performed. His duty ended. He wanted now only to return to Ann Luzanne.

ANN and James Canfield stood on the dome-enclosed balcony of their small hotel at Fort Copernicus, watching the great green globe of Earth above them. Unable to abide Millikan City any longer, they had rocketed to Luna's near side. Here, the black sky was airless, and the stars shone in a golden wealth that was not to be seen anywhere else - - - unless it was from deep space, itself.

Ann said: "Everything will be all right, now. Even if we are exiled here for a few years, governments do rise and fall. The matriarchs will be out eventually - - - then we can return."

"I agree," said Canfield. "Just figure it out. There's a rising curve that should bring the males back into power in less than a decade - - - now that Gorken's influence is *kaput*, especially. I can take the wait, if you can."

"Darling, do you really think I care where I'm at," Ann replied, "as long as I've got you? Nothing else matters."

"Thank you, Mrs. Canfield. Incidentally, I've been holding out on you."

"Oh."

"Oh, yes." Canfield laughed. "I didn't tell you the Ones got through to me one last time. It was right after I killed Gorken. I guess their universe was already breaking up, being supplanted by a new world based on the causal sequences I set in motion. Anyhow, the thought projection was very weak - - - but I got it."

"And - - - ?"

"Gorken apparently had had some really long-range plans in store for Oliver Brown - - - "

Ann gazed at him steadily. "Why?"

"Because, according to the Ones, he'd had Flug and Skink - - - unknowingly, of course - - - give Brown an extra-long dosage on that last trip to the clinic. Forty-five years!"

"But, that's the treatment you got in Brown's place!"

"Exactly. So, it looks like I'm going to age in a normal fashion after all. What do you think of that, sweetheart?"

Ann squeezed his hand. "It would never have made any difference," she said. "I believe I'd have kept on loving you - - if you'd turned seventy on me overnight. What you were like as a professor, I don't know. But I certainly do know something about the kind of man you are now - - - and, oh darling, I like everything about it! You're as young as any man in this world - - - young in spirit, too, and that's what counts. And another thing," she said, "what makes you think Marilyn could have loved you more than I do? Isn't that what you were implying? Didn't she marry you at seventy-two or something like - - - - ?"

She never finished. Canfield suddenly crushed her lips and the end of the sentence died a natural death. The warmly-rapturous couple remained locked in embrace for a long moment

afterward.

Finally, they released each other and drew breath. Canfield glanced up at the globe of Terra. He decided there was one more resolution he had better make while he was thinking of it. He loved Ann and they were bound to lead a long and happy mated life together. Still, there was no sense in risking the slightest jeopardy.

It might be just as well from now on, he decided, if he never allowed Marilyn's name to come up. Wives of Ann's temperament often had difficulty understanding how a sensible man could ever have been attracted to a woman of "that certain type" . . .

THE END

SVEN

By Lou Tabakow

The new atomic age is bound to bring its crop of heroes—take Sven, for example . . .

SVEN was big—bigger than any man working with the breeder pile. That wasn't really his name; but one of the technicians had started calling him Sven and the name had stuck. For some reason it seemed appropriate. He wasn't tall—barely five feet, but his tremendous shoulder span and his huge chest accounted for most of his three hundred pounds.

He wasn't too bright either. In fact the consensus of opinion around the pile was that a low-grade moron could give him cards and spades and still outsmart him hands down. Of course this could partly be due to jealousy.

The top brass had been plenty leery about turning him loose around the reactor pile that sent forth an endless stream of radioactive isotopes. But Dr. Jablowski was the fair-haired boy at that time, and what he said, went. He insisted on giving Sven a chance.

At first most of the men feared him. His impassive face and his unearthly strength awed and frightened them. After a time however he had earned their somewhat grudging respect. Even the chief was heard to remark that Sven was worth half-a-dozen run-of the mill technicians The technicians themselves couldn't help agreeing, though a little ruefully.

Sven's feet moved his bulk ponderously, but his huge hands and supple fingers could move with incredible speed and the dexterity of a surgeon when performing a delicate task—the same hands that could bend a steel bar with little effort.

After they'd overcome their awe of him, some of the younger men took to teasing him. They'd walk boldly up to his massive frame and look at his face, unafraid, and a little tauntingly.

"Hey Sven," they'd say. "Wanna double-date with me tonight. I know a blonde that'd really go for you. She likes 'em tough."

Then they'd strike a fighting pose, and shuffle their feet like a Fancy Dan boxer. "C'mon, put 'em up," they'd mock, "Let's go a couple rounds."

This routine always drew a round of laughter from those watching, but Sven never answered, or even deigned to turn his head. He'd just stand there inscrutibly, ignoring them, waiting for Dr. Jablowski to give him something to do. He took orders from no one else, not even the chief.

Then one day one of the huge girders

supporting the roof gave away. No one ever figured out how it happened. It just snapped at a rivet point. The control room was a metal box sealed at one end by a thick lead wall. The free end of the girder dropped toward the control room, buckling the roof and bouncing off the protecting wall to the ground. Deadly radiation was pouring into the control room in which a technican was trapped. The buckled roof had jammed the door so that it couldn't be budged.

A faint rapping brought to mind a picture of the poor guy alone in there, frantically pounding on the unyielding steel door, while deadly radiation poured into him. A group of men worked trying to force it open, but it stubbornly resisted all their efforts.

The emergency signal sounded and the men turned reluctantly at first, and then headed on a dead run for the safety chute to the outside — all except Sven. He stood stupidly and uncomprehendingly in a corner while the men rushed past No one had time to think of Sven or the trapped man in the control room. The poor devil was as good as dead in there anyway, by now.

Dr. Jablowski came running out of the office, looking about wildly, till he spied Sven. He ran up to him, breathing hard. "Sven," he said, speaking slowly and enunciating each word carefully, as he always did when giving Sven orders, "Get that man out of the control room, and bring him outside." Then Dr. Jablowski joined the rest of the men dashing for the outside and safety.

No one saw what happened then, but in less than a minute Sven joined those on the outside Under his right arm he carried the unconscious man whom he gently deposited in the waiting ambulance at Dr. Jablowski's orders. Then he turned and stood impassively—while the men cheered.

It was only after the cheering died down that they noticed Sven's left arm hung uselessly at his side. The strong supple fingers were battered and broken. His whole left side seemed to be caved-in. He'd used his body as a battering ram.

Even as they watched, his eyes dimmed, his left knee buckled, and he thudded ponderously to the ground. Dr. Jablowski bent quickly over him, while the rest of the men crowded round, straining for a better look.

"Can you fix him up Doc? Will he be all right?" asked one of the men anxiously.

Dr. Jablowski looked up. "Afraid not," he muttered ruefully. "But we'll never forget J—Seven—even when the improved J—Eight robot gets here."

THE END

THESE BACK ISSUES ARE STILL AVAILABLE

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LETTERS

Dear Ray:

You say Byrne wrote the Flannigan stories. Okay, he wrote them. It's the first time I ever saw in another writer's work the characteristic touches that mark your own . . . but okay, he wrote them. But this business of him — or anybody else, including H. Browne — being able to write exactly in the Burroughs' style . . . don't kid me, junior! Careful study of the Master's style can enable a competent writer who loves the Tarzan and Mars books to approximate the style — you know, throw in a "Stygian gloom" or "the jungle patriarchs" here and there — but the *real* flavor isn't there at all. You think you got somebody who can do Burroughs the way Burroughs did it? Well, you tell him to stop writing for Ray Palmer. You tell him to beat a fast path to the door of AMAZING STORIES; because this is the writer I want.

Joe Gibson's letter aroused pretty much the same feelings in me as they did in you. His kind of Tarzan gives me the billious trots — and if that makes me infantile, kindly hand me my bottle and diaper. When I grow too old to dream then I'll be ready for the boneyard and in a hurry to get there.

Howard Browne
Editor, Amazing Stories

Dear Ray:

A few months back I didn't share your belief that sf needs the adventure type of story to make a comeback. I didn't understand why everyone said that sf was beginning to stink. I didn't understand because I was a newcomer to the field and I thought every story was simply terrific! But soon I found out that the same type of story was printed in *Galaxy* and *Astounding* month after month.

I went downtown and bought up some back-issues. Most of these were Palmer mags. The first story I read was a 45-000 worder, "The Last Days Of Thronas" by John Bloodstone. I read it through and I was completely fascinated. The same goes for "Power Metal", "Colossus," "The Return Of Tharn", "The Land Beyond The Lens", and a host of others. I had that "sense of wonder" when I read those stories. So, I made up my mind: I'm with Palmer.

Marty Fleischman
1247 Grant Avenue
Bronx 56, New York

Dear RAP:

You're as full of emotional words as a dictionary — but who do you think you're kidding? What Joe asks for under the name of "realism" is humanity. Joe wouldn't object — and neither would I — to a wildly improbable fantasy containing wildly improbable characters doing ditto.y improbable things — but there's no humanity left in Burroughs. I don't mean Joe Friday deadpanning, but honest emotion that you seem so concerned with. You accuse Joe of trying to foist off some sort of stark realism on you but he's quite obviously not. Joe *wants* emotion in the story — not cardboard figures out of a pattern, jerked through the same boring old set of paces over and over again. That's what Tarzan was RAP, and John Carter and all the rest of the little, banal shadows in Burroughs' old rut. You are the one that will end up with restricted plots. You can always be sure when reading a Burroughs story that no one will ever take a crap, screw a broad or act in anything except the manner laid down in the Rules & Laws For Action of Heroes, Heroines, and Villians In Lousy Fiction

You don't want people with good imaginations RAP — you want yo-yos in a rut of their own who only want to read milk pap idiocies that follow a rut that is really so similar to their own as to give them a homey feeling. You want people with so little emotion and imagination that they can't conceive of anyone acting in a human manner without straining a synapse. Why not publish a kiddy book? I'm sure that the very young and very immature will enjoy this sort of gunk — and rightfully, it's on their level.

As for your idea of bringing back the good old days — I'm not going to

object because I don't think it would do any good.

The day stf becomes limited to one stinking little category — yours, Gold's Campbell's, Boucher's or anybody else's — is the day I sell all my mags and doff my beany cap for a fez. So go ahead with rip-snorting, hack-written, howlingly idiotic, utterly implausible space operas — I'll buy it. But don't come around with any puppy poopy or cat crud about "This is it!" 'Cause a lot of us will just yawn and belch over it.

Dick Ellington
299 Riverside Dr. Apt. 11A
New York 25, N. Y.

Dick, there's such a thing as gentility and good taste. I think this issue gives the lie to your statement, although you will probably call it crud because it isn't crude! To you, moving your bowels is "realism", and somehow you link it with "honest emotion". We believe that emotion originates somewhat higher up in the anatomy. As for imagination, can't you imagine anything more exciting than that? We can - - and we have writers who can! In fact, right now we take no back seat - - we have an array of TERRIFIC writers and we're happy about it. Somehow, I don't see the readers of this issue joining you in your yawning and belching. Dick, do you know the phase in development toward maturity where the body functions usually described in four-letter words become "daring" realism? Well, it's just before appreciation for good manners and the shucking off of the crudities of adolescence. If you feel you've got a good point for the improvement of science fiction, try it on all sf editors, and see if any agree. Even Horace's category doesn't "stink" in that respect. But maybe we're all wrong. ..... Rap.

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Leonard Brown
4701 Snyder Ave.
Brooklyn 3, N. Y.

Gentlemen:

I do not wish to receive any more "Other Worlds" magazines. I will pay for no more magazines, so please do not send me any more, or else they'll get thrown into the garbage, along with the other filth.

I do not share your fine estimation of yourself or your trash.

Henry Javorek
2287 Columbus Rd.
Cleveland 13, Ohio

Oh shoot! And just when we thought we were doing so good, too! ..... Rap.

Dear Ray:

I think your brand of s-f is better than any that I have ever read. I am no critic, but I mean what I say. I have been a fan for approximately two years, but I think I've read just about every book in the field. However, I think your magazine is the greatest so far, and I hope you keep it up. Incidentally, where can I obtain Shelley's "Necessity of Atheism"? Now, let's see some of those stories you published when you were editor for *Amazing*. I think they are the best I've read.

Sandy Graham
P.O. Box 236
Whitehorse, Y.T, Can.

Dear Ray:

I don't know how to start this letter unless I just say "Hurrah!" I thought I would never see any more good science fiction stories except in the old magazines I have, which I've read again and again. I can hardly put OW down! You've brought sf to life again!

Guy W. Howell,
Postmaster,
Mannville, Fla.

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